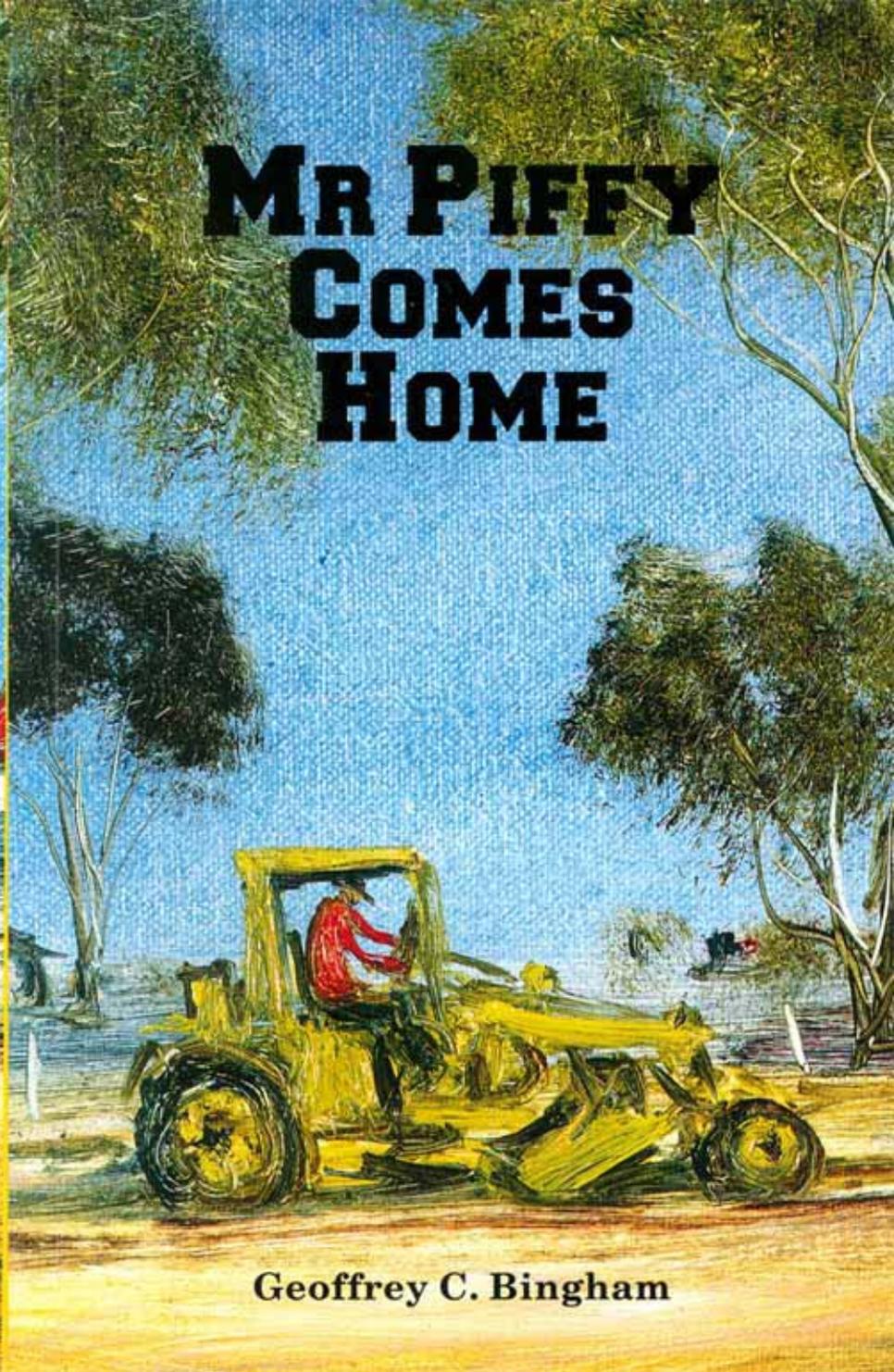


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MR PIFFY COMES HOME

Geoffrey C. Bingham

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Mr Piffy Comes Home

and other stories

Geoffrey C. Bingham

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FOREWORD

ALTHOUGH Geoffrey Bingham was known and appreciated as a short-story writer in the *Bulletin* more than thirty years ago, he did not bring out his first collection until 1980. That book, *To Command the Cats*, gave his readers a comprehensive insight into his concerns and abilities, enabling them—as Douglas Stewart said—to see what his world was made of.

Geoffrey Bingham's world, of course, reflects his own life: his childhood on Sydney's North Shore, his experiences during the Second World War in Malaya where he won the Military Medal for bravery and suffered as a prisoner of war at Changi and elsewhere, his five years of farming after the war, and his subsequent life as a clergyman in various parts of the world.

The fact that emerges most clearly from his writing is his understanding of people. Whether he is being kindly or critical he is always perceptive, always probing at the heart of things, always fascinated by human diversity. He is concerned with what we used to call 'character' and the forces that help to mould it; with motives and responses, personality and interaction. It is this concern that illuminates so many of his stories, whether the central figures are seen in the context of peace or war, affluence or

poverty, town or countryside; whether they happen to be schoolboys stealing fruit or blowing up someone's letterbox, an Australian soldier unexpectedly becoming a jungle guerrilla behind enemy lines, or a maniac deliberately starting bushfires in New South Wales.

It is good, therefore, to have this second collection so soon after the first. It not only extends the range of our acquaintance with his work, but it enables us to enjoy more fully his distinctive vision of humanity.

Colin Thiele

MR PIFFY COMES HOME

Mr PIFFY stared ahead from the cabin of his Council grader, and there were tears in his eyes. It was unusual for Mr Piffy to have tears in his eyes, because he was a mild man, not given to unusual grades of feeling. When we say mild, we mean undemonstrative. Of course, Mr Piffy had feeling. All human beings have feeling. It is just that they learn to conceal, control, or repress such feelings. Others, of course, express them, sometimes strongly, sometimes aggressively, sometimes joyfully. Mr Piffy kept his feelings almost at the one level.

This one day, there were tears. He swung the wheel this way and that, keeping to the straight line of the road edge, but inwardly his sorrow was deep. Agnes, dear Agnes, Agnes Piffy, his long-beloved wife, had left him. Not abandoned him, as so many dissatisfied or frustrated wives are wont to do these days, but because she had shuffled off this mortal coil. She had died. She would not be there at the end of the day when Mr Piffy would set his tractor-machine towards their little stone cottage and look forward to Agnes being there to meet him.

He pictured her through the mist of his tears. Agnes: middle height (for a woman), well proportioned (plump, but not fat), ageing (but not old), and most comely. Her long, flowing hair would be done up

in a sensible bun, and her smooth face with natural colour and her kindly grey eyes that peered gently—all of this normally would be waiting for him. She would also be dressed neatly, and wearing an apron. That was one of the old Germanic customs her family had never abandoned, and Agnes least of all. He had never seen her in her unsleeping hours out of an apron. Her aprons were her quiet pride and joy, and to others a matter of head-shaking amazement. Good old Agnes! The tears which had been a thin flowing now became a heavy fall. He wrenched the driving wheel, feeling its warm iron slip through his hands. He pushed the accelerator, and the old girl of a grader waddled rapidly along the bitumen highway.

MR PIFFY had a second sorrow, and it was difficult to know which of his two sorrows was the greater. The Council had deemed it fitting that their most revered, honest and ancient grader driver should retire. He was not being sacked because of inefficiency, or even because his age had reduced his powers. All acknowledged—even Frank Kranz, the Council Chairman—that Mr Piffy had years of work in him yet, and good work at that, but alas! sixty-five years of age is sixtyfive, and younger men are waiting in the wings, and in these days of high unemployment younger men must have a chance.

Besides, there is the age pension. There is the superannuation, and there is the vegetable garden, the bees, and the chooks. Mr Piffy knew the superannuation was handsome. He loved his vegetable garden. No one in all the Barossa grew vegies like

his. They were legendary. Also his chooks were great layers, and he had kept up the breed with the passing of the years. No, Mr Piffy had everything going for him, so far as security and comfort and interests were concerned, but today Mr Piffy knew he had nothing. All of this was everything with Agnes being alive. With her death, it was nothing.

If he grew large and nutritious vegetables it was for Agnes. He liked the gleam of appreciation in her eyes. He loved the quiet comments of praise when she took the bucket daily in which he offered her of his produce. She never took the eggs for granted, for she admired the size of them, especially the regular double-yolkers. His honey she adored. Anyone who has never eaten honey compounded of white clover, Salvation Jane, and garden flowers—to say nothing of the occasional eucalypt—has never fully understood what the nectar of the gods really is.

Also Mrs Piffy understood grading—not of vegetables or eggs or honey but of roads. It was not for nothing she had sat with him on occasions, especially when she had brought him a cooked meal. There she would be, perched up on the grader, staring ahead as the red gravel soil churned away in an endless earthen wave. She knew, too, what it was to go on to the lonely side roads where you may not see a vehicle in five hours. But it was the life she liked for her man, and she knew how many lives were saved by it.

Now there would be no Mrs Piffy bringing him a hot meal in the winter, or a cold salad in the summer; and even had she lived, the joy of his life—apart from Mrs Piffy herself—was soon to conclude. Mr Piffy, Henry Arthur Piffy, was to go onto the pension list. It

was a summary rejection of his years of developed and matured grader experience.

No wonder Mr Piffy's tears flowed. For a normally unemotional man, their flow was strong.

You may wonder where a man would get a name like Piffy. Henry Piffy was a descendant of a long line of Piffys, or, to be more correct, a line of Pfiffi people.

The Pfiffi family was Teutonic in origin, although I am not sure that Pfiffi is a common Germanic name. It does not matter: the name was originally spelt with a silent 'p', and ended with an 'i'. Shortly after the family had settled in the Barossa Valley, and had begun farming with cows, bees and grapes, they had conceded a trifle to Australian culture and had become Piffy. You may even find a Piffey in the phone book. They all spring from the one stock.

And a fine stock, too. Good, honest rural men. Steady, sturdy farmers, raising their children with high morals and Lutheran doggedness. Some of them had migrated to Adelaide and set up businesses. Others had gone further afield. Some had linked up with compatriots in the Riverina of New South Wales, or near the coast in Queensland and out at centres like Boonah and Kalbar; but they were all of one stock, and very proud of it. Not too proud, of course, to incorporate other Anglo-Saxon blood from British stock. Eventually, during the course of two world wars, they had flowed until there were Australians only, and very creditable Australians at that.

Take the contribution Mr Piffy had made. We mean his grading. Many a person would stare at you if you

made a statement about grading being quite something. They would look at you as though grading were a common or garden thing, so to speak. There they would be wrong. Few folk are as little recognised as grading men. You will know that if you are a motorist.

You will be driving along at a great pace, probably over the State limit, when you see a notice painted in luminous red, a brilliant notice with black lettering which says, WORKMAN AHEAD, or, SOFT EDGES, or, SLOW DOWN, GRADER AHEAD. Then your features will pucker with annoyance. Something of godhead—as a driver—dissipates with the lurid warning and command. There might be dirt on the road. You could slip on it. There could easily be an accident. You think to yourself, 'What do these graders do, anyway? They cut the soil from the side of the road, put it onto the road, and then on the way back they shovel it all back where it was. So what's the benefit?'

As I said, grading is misunderstood. What drivers of speeding vehicles forget—if they ever knew it—is that the soil at the side of the road is treacherous if it is not bone level with the road, if it does not continue the slight curve of the surface. The touch of a tyre against a developed ridge can cause a vehicle to roll, to turn over, to run up against a safety post, or to hurtle into a ditch. If the ballasted edge is lower than the road, there can be a dangerous skid, and the car may roll. These are some of the hazards; but what then of the weeds? What of those, eh?

Take those roads with so many bends. Put a few maniacs driving on them. Have some weeds growing—thick green fennel or four-foot-high wild oats, or

a few of those gargantuan Scotch thistles—and then what have you? A concealed bend, even concealed driveways; Farmer Schultz comes turning out of his driveway, and—wham!—a city slicker who can't see through tall, dry grass bangs slap into the emerging vehicle. On the evening news—radio or telly—is the announcement of another accident on a lone stretch of the main highway. The names of the victims have not yet been given, because the relatives have not yet been informed. And so on.

Let us accept the fact that graders do a fine work, and that the better the driver, the more experienced the workman, the greater the safety on the roads. These were matters which Henry and Agnes both knew so well. And now Agnes was dead, and Henry was due to retire and live in an empty house, and bring vegetables to the back door only for himself. Likewise the honey and the eggs.

Mr Piffy's tears continued to flow.

SUDDENLY a strange thought struck Mr Piffy, a thought which was all against generations of Germanic training. Should I rather say, generations of Australian training, under which the Teuton discipline still lives? Mr Piffy never wavered in his obedience to District Engineer, Thomas Hoffrichter. When he told Henry Piffy to work on the Highway, then that is what Henry did. If he told him to go up Kranz's old road, as far as Smithson farm, then that is what Mr Piffy did. It would have been unthinkable for the grader driver ever to have selected a road for himself. He would never have said, 'Look at Leaney's

lane. Hasn't been graded in five years. Let us give it ago.'

Piffy knew, as Hoffrichter also knew, that these great matters were decided on the first Monday night of the month at the Monthly Council Meeting. There were other meetings of course, but grading was always fixed at the meeting on the first Monday night. So Piffy would be given his work sheet, his directions and his advice, and he would fulfil it to a T. An obedient grader driver was Mr Piffy, and no farmer could bribe him to be otherwise.

The idea which struck Mr Piffy was that he should proceed up the loneliest road in all the Valley. My years in the Diplomatic Service have left their indelible impression on me, and I am too cautious to be able to divulge the name of that road. If this story ever meets the eyes of our South Australian public, or even the citizens of the Barossa Valley, I will be in the soup. You call no road the loneliest, for that implies two things. The first is that there is a lonely road in that Valley, and the second, that such-and-such a road is the loneliest of them all. If you can imagine what that would do for the tourist trade, or rather, what it would do against it, then you will understand why I do not divulge the name of that road. There is another reason, an even better reason, but then you will discover that for yourself, and so I leave you to read the remainder of this story, and then do your own investigation. That is, if you dare!

Mr Piffy swung the great machine into that road. He set the blade finely so that it continued the natural slope of the curved road. You will know that roads curve upwards to the centre in a natural convex pat-

tern, and so water flows off the road quickly, thus preserving it from water-scouring. Also the task of the grader is to open up closed channels, so that the water may flow away from the sides. Water which lies there will weaken the foundation of the roads, and they may quickly be destroyed. I say all this because Mr Piffy had his mind set on doing that road quite a lot of good, and in fact he was. He graded for some miles, and, being a creature of habit, he turned and graded the other side, thereby establishing a right balance. He then regarded the ballast on both sides of the road, so that the next farmer coming along would be delighted with the new width, the new clearance, and would find the customary corrugations entirely erased.

Mr Piffy chuckled. 'They'll get a surprise,' he said to himself. He was enjoying it immensely. Not only would the farmers be surprised, but Engineer Hoffrichter, Council Chairman Kranz, and indeed all councillors would be surprised. He could even hear their conversation, in snatches.

They would be saying, 'Now fancy that! I wonder why Piffy took it into his head to go up that road?'

He could reply, were he there, 'Well, when was somebody last up that road, grading it?' that would be a knockout question, for he could not remember, in history, when that road had been graded. They would be surprised, of course, but then they would have nothing to say. He knew that they would have to be tolerant of him, because of his imminent retirement, and because, in all the years he had been on Council, no one had ever laid a complaint against him. He chuckled gleefully at his little bit of un-Teutonic

rebellion, and for a time his tears were dried.

Later they returned. Not in the former steady, heavy flow, but in a light mist; just enough to dim his sight a trifle. This did not mean that a growth of wild oats, tall and sturdy, did not go down as a swathe before his blade, nor that the red volcanic soil did not flow as a smooth wave from the curve of the grader blade, churning outwards as the machine made steady progress. It did all that, but something was happening to Mr Piffy. His eyes were dimming more than ever, with tears or tiredness he did not know. The rich green fields with their Friesians (black and white) and their Shorthorns (red and red-to-grey), and even the chunky Aberdeens (black only) were beginning to waver before his eyes and become things of fantasy. Indeed, the regulated rows of wine grapes, now laden in the autumn, and even golden-leafed, were unregulating themselves. They were, so to speak, floating. What is more, the roar of the grader was dulling down and in a few moments had subsided into silence. Yet when the grader, consonant with the silence that had fallen, should also have ceased to operate, it was still ploughing on.

The grader was cutting as fine a surface furrow as ever it had done, and the soil was billowing out in great style as well as ever it had done but Mr Piffy was puzzled. He was puzzled not only at what he was seeing, or, to be correct, not seeing. He was in deep wonder at the new sensations which were visiting his tired old body.

When I say 'tired old body' I do not mean to infer that Mr Piffy was a worn-out creature, a person who was burned out, or, as they say now, 'had had it'. Oh,

no! Mr Piffy, I believe, was good enough for years of high-grade grader service. Yet to Mr Piffy there came so delightful a sensation as would have been outside his descriptive powers to communicate. It was a *gradely* feeling, so to speak. So excellent, so high, so much of fine quality was it, that it would have taken an artist to describe it. It was compounded of various feelings. They were feelings of floating, of hovering over a world once known but now transcended. It was a sense of rich well being. Pain was gone, and tension with it. *Tranquillity* could describe it, or perhaps *serenity*. Mr Piffy was so enjoying it that he could not fix upon a word, but the word he might have used was *blessed*. That is how he felt—blessed.

To his surprise, and also to his delight, he was still driving his great tractor-machine. What amazed him, however, was its change in colour. The rich yellow-orange of the Council colour, eminently sensible and easily seen by approaching motorists, had now changed to rich gold; in fact, old gold. Actually, if you can get such a thing, it was one hundred carat gold! He could see that. The metal—if it were metal—was wholly translucent. It was solid gold, but then it had a transcendent element about it. He shook his head in wonderment. He had never anticipated having a golden grader, and he trembled quite a bit with the very joy of it all.

The soil was not, of course, gold. Yet it too had that transcendent touch about it, and whilst Mr Piffy long ago had become a connoisseur of soils, this soil was such as he had never seen. It flowed away from the grader blade without that crunchy, grating noise and feel. It was a delight to see it flow thus. Also the

herbage growing at the side of the road seemed to take a positive delight in being curved back. It was as though it lay back in serenity and nodded gratefully to Mr Piffy, and rather appreciated what he was doing.

As for the road, it had become a positive highway of joy. Just to come to such a thought was a bit of a task for the grader driver, but then he felt exceptionally light-headed, and also light-hearted, and not at all self-conscious. In fact, he felt that at any moment he might burst into song. He rummaged in his mind for a few old Lutheran hymns but none of them came, as though they would not have been adequate anyway.

What, then, was on that road? Mr Piffy did not know. It was a delightful road. It was a wide road. One could imagine traffic scudding over its surface without any friction. There would be no skidding. It was a safe road. All of these thoughts jumped to his mind and increased his pleasant feelings. How he enjoyed this bit of grading! It was not the loneliest road in the Barossa Valley—not any more. Then he thought, ‘And it is not even in the Barossa!’ That idea was of course fantastic. Indeed, it stunned him a little, but by no means depressed him.

I MUST interrupt our strange narrative to share an item or two of news with you. Doubtless you will be wondering as much about the narrator as the main character he is describing. He too must confess his helplessness to explain. At first he was inclined to remember the strange items of news that come, from

time to time: 'The entire earthmoving equipment of Hands and Company has been removed from their work site at Blank's End.' I understand this is a regular item in the USA. Apparently criminal organisations know how to filch this heavy machinery, remove numbers, stamp in others, repaint, and finally dispose of it at a handsome profit. What they do is, of course, a very heavy operation, and great skills are required. But then, they do it!

Another news items you might anticipate, in order to explain my story, is as follows:

Residents of the Barossa Valley, alarmed at the disappearance of Mr Henry Piffy, have been searching for him. It is known that Mr Piffy was at work on the Main Highway on Friday last. He was seen by motorists at 5.00 p.m., but not following that time. Mr Piffy always collects his road signs and notice prior to knocking off work. Police are intrigued by the fact that those signs were not collected, nor was the grader returned to the Council yards. Mr Piffy sometimes drives the tractor home, but there was no sign of it at the Piffy farmhouse.

What puzzles police is that Mr Piffy has not returned home. His vegetables needed watering, his fowls needed feeding. Whilst a neighbour has undertaken to do this, the case is so serious that police have come from Angas Street Headquarters in Adelaide, and are combing the district. Local residents have combined with the police and their fine team of police dogs in an endeavour to find the lost man. It is thought that Mr Piffy, whose wife died recently, may be in a state of shock, and even of amnesia.

Thereafter, in such an item there would be a description of Henry Piffy and his features, height, age, and distinguishing marks. Of course, the item you would expect to read or hear would be the following:

Residents of the Barossa Valley have reported finding a Council grader on a lonely road in the Valley. Slumped over his grader-machine was Henry Arthur Piffy, due shortly to retire. Medical authorities say Mr Piffy died of cardiac arrest. He was predeceased by his wife Agnes only by a matter of days. The funeral will be held tomorrow at 10.00 a.m., in the Hahndorf Lutheran Church.

Now the strange thing about my story is that the grader was never found. 'All right, then,' you say, 'it was stolen.' that could well be. Perhaps Mr Piffy sold it. Perhaps the thieves disposed of Mr Piffy's body after killing him. It may be that they loaded that great machine on a secondary mover and took it interstate. That is possible. Certainly the police will never believe what actually happened. If the reader finds this difficult to believe, then so does the narrator; but he *knows* that it is true. Few understand the amazing principle of *translation*, but then, who has evidence enough to deny such may happen?

WE COME now to the close of the narrative. There is not much more to tell. It is just that Mr Piffy proceeded on his happy way. He was richly intoxicated by the transformation of his grader into something which cannot be said to be less than *celestial*. Here he was, foaming out the beautiful roadside soil in a grader, the likes of which he had never seen, let alone driven. Ahead of him was this never-ending highway, so strangely unfamiliar, and yet so well known. Whilst he was puzzled, he was not perturbed. He graded on. He was entranced by the fact that the grader was silent, the air was still, the atmosphere was without dust or smell of dieseline. In fact, the air was heady,

like a Barossa wine or a fine champagne. It was exhilarating. It was sweet and strong. It made a man feel as though he had entered perpetual youth. Oh, it was all very wonderful!

Then Mr Piffy strained forward in unbelief and trembling delight. It was as though he recognised the road at last. It was *his* road, his *old* road! But then, it was not. Everything was so different. If this were his road, then he must be nearing his home. His heart pounded away, and commensurately his pulses throbbed. His eyes began to smart with tears, and he felt a cry welling up within him. Any moment he would be home!

Not for one second did he think he would be coming to an empty home, a voiceless house, a silent place. In all this new world that could not be. He strained forward, but without fear. No trace of dread or loneliness remained in mind, spirit or heart. Indeed, he found himself endowed with a peerless intuition, a faultless understanding, an infallible assurance.

Yes! As he expected: it *was* his home, and he could see the White Leghorns behind the house, near the old mulberry tree, and some of them were stretching, some flapping their wings; and Old Faithful, the large Rhode Island Red rooster, was preparing for his thundering crow of triumph. Way back was the vegetable garden, with the rich green of the caulies and the cabbages, the brussels sprouts and the broccoli. He could see the ferny leaves of the carrots and the proud plumage of the parsnips. His gaze flew to the house, his beloved house, and then to the gate; and his intuition was proven correct for all time—or, if you like, for all eternity.

There she was—Agnes—large as life, so to speak, though not overly large at all. Well-proportioned, face smiling, hair built back into a bun, and looking very substantial—there was Agnes.

His heart leaped, his arms flew into the air, and he cried in tones of unusual vehemence, ‘Hullo there, Agnes, my pet!’

She, for her part, was not unmoved by this unusual display of emotion, quite unbecoming one of stern Teutonic origins. She kept waving, and crying out, ‘Dear, dear Henry,’ until he leaped down from his golden grader, and began running towards her, arms outstretched, calling out all the time, ‘Agnes! Agnes, my beautiful one. Agnes, my pet!’

RETRIBUTION

Winter had passed. The spring had come but it, too, was on the wane. It was passing into summer. Things in the bush were drying.

Each end-of-spring, he came to this part of the mountains. He looked at the age-old crags of the worn peaks, marvelling at their unchanging haze of gentle blue. They were unsmiling, aloof, and yet bowing their heads as though in detached agreement with him. This is how he, the firebug, the crazy pyromaniac would see them each end-of-spring. He would bow back at them silently, do his work, deliver his soul, and be gone.

Every season it was the same, and this season it was no different. He would hold his head high like a quivering thoroughbred. Such a one would sniff into the breeze and find in it some cause for excitement. He sniffed into the warming breeze and his body quivered. His nerves tingled. His pulses began to throb, even to jump. After a time he could feel them racing. He was realising his high calling.

That was what he always named it, 'The high calling'. He had heard that term somewhere; maybe in a lecture or a sermon. It did not matter. He had a high calling. Each year he would fulfil that calling and be gone, back into the dreary year. He would

recede into the slow, deadly hate which he cherished. The sluggish stream of his life would flow on drearily to nowhere, and perhaps to nothing. Yet for these moments—at the end of spring—he was ready to fulfil his annual destiny.

At the rising of the summer he would stand on the highest peak. The peak itself was a high ridge, worn like the rest of the peaks, but rough and cragged, and in its ochreous clays, in its patches of sandy grey soil, in its rocks and boulders, grew the native plants and scrub. The hard, gnarled banksia vied with the tough, stunted eucalypts. Varieties of shrubs he could not name crowded in together, yet around them was a blaze of colours, colours which were endemic to these old mountains. Flannel flowers tossed their heads in the slight breezes. Here and there clematis ripped its white foamy head, and a chance waratah bloomed its dull crimson, whilst in other patches the succulents flowed over the brilliant ochres of the washed clay. In a few weeks the rare Christmas bells would show their waxy beauty.

He would stand on this highest of peaks and survey all that lay about him. His sniffing of the breeze was to catch the dryness of the hills. Clouds he would curse. Heavy dews he hated. The dull grey of the rolling mists he loathed. He liked the days to be strong, brisk days, the winds to blow and toss the wild flowers, and to dry the wetness of the winter to a crisp dryness. He loved the first inflow of the breezes that brought heat with them from the west, and dehydration to these ancient flora. Dry though these prehistoric plants might become, their vegetable oils increased with their dryness. They carried

within them the flammable materials of their own destruction. When he thought of that he would rub his hands, and the glee would rise within him.

Today the breeze was promising, but not final. No matter: he did not care. He did not wish to hasten with his ritual. Indeed the longer the better. All he asked of this brooding Nature was dry days. He wanted the heat of the west to become a shimmering heat, one which sent the hot waves quivering along the black of the bitumen roads and into the vast paddocks of ripening wheat. When the gold was at its most brilliant pitch, and when the skies began to glare, that was the time the merciless westerlies would rise in a mass of eddying whirlies and rush the great range of mountains. The scrub on the ridges would bend before the ceaseless energy of the drying wind, and in no time the very air would be filled with the resinous smells of the flora. A sweet premonition of coming destruction would be there, turgid in the air.

He dreamed about it as he stood like a sentinel, outlined against the sky. He was still, transfixed with his own thoughts. After a time his eyes inverted in their gaze. He saw nothing about him. He could not even feel the breeze on his face. He was rigid, turned to stone. His thoughts within were gripping him, and he was in a cold fury of hatred.

Whether he realised it or not, it was part of the ritual. Each year, prior to the event, when he came to smell the breezes and test the dryness, this would happen. He would be recalled into memory. He would dwindle down from the grown man that he was, into a small and pitiful boy. He would stand on such a

crag as now he stood and look across these ancient mountains. He would hate their grandeur. He would shiver before their magnificence. They would threaten him with their solemn splendour. His mind would go into a riot of fear. Irrationally he would see them as reaching out to him, embracing him, drawing him into their mysterious bosom, and holding him there until he choked in the embrace. Within him was a shrill scream he could not articulate, try though he would. He would gasp with the fear, trying to draw breath and failing. Then, with the terror of it, he would go limp, every part of him paralysed.

All this would happen to him, but the man standing next to him would not even feel it. The man was, of course, his father. But then he was not his father, so far away he seemed to live. The boy would love him, crying out within, 'Daddy! Daddy! Come quickly. Hold me. I'm afraid!' He wanted to take his little hands and flay them against his father's side so that the man would come out of himself and see his son. This the man seemed incapable of doing. Instead he would stand, legs apart, looking across at the blue of the hills and the gorges, holding a faint smile and oblivious of the boy who stood beside him.

Sometimes his smile would become mysterious, his lips part in unbelief, and he would say, 'How beautiful! How incredibly beautiful!'

When he said that, the small boy would scream inside with fear, and he would want to cry out, 'Nothing is beautiful! Nothing is beautiful until you love me! Can't you see I'm afraid? Can't you see I hate it all?'

He dared not cry this out. Instinctively, he knew

his father lived in a world which he, the boy, could never know. His little hands longed to batter away at the rough sides of the mountains, or to pummel the great bulk of his own father, but he knew it would never be understood, let alone accepted. So he kept silence. He froze within himself, always living only moments away from the fear.

In the city—where they lived—it was somewhat different. The boxed-in houses did not threaten him. They were just inane and helpless. The black roads were sterile. The lawns and gardens were neutral. He had only a dull contempt for it all. He wondered how this magnificent man could live in it all and keep his soul intact. He sensed that the periodic visits to the mountains were indispensable to his survival as a person. In a curious and perverted way they were also indispensable to him, the boy. He needed the fear, the gut-gripping terror. It kept him alive as a person. In a queer, twisted way it was as necessary to him as to his father.

The ritual was not yet over. Each year he would stand transfixed. Anyone happening to pass him would think him to be in a trance. His eyes would be sightless, fixed, though his gaze seemed to be upon the blue mountains. Inwardly, each year, he would relive the matter of his fear. What he hated most of all was to see the eagerness of his father. This man would strain until his body was almost quivering, and he would say to the boy, 'Come on, son. Let's go down to the valley.' The man never once looked at the taut boy, nor sensed his agony. He never once realised the crucifixions he wrought within the spirit of his child.

Down into the valley they would go. Deep into the belly of the mountains they would penetrate. They would clamber over the large boulders, would wave their way around the high bush ferns, and brush against the rough banksia. They would see the large lizards run with fury into the rocks, or watch the eagle high up, weaving its royal way until lost in the blue. They would walk the soft valley paths of white sand, or dangle their naked feet in the ice-cold ripples of the flowing creeks. The man loved every moment of it. The boy hated it with every ounce of his being. It darkened his spirit as it happened. Even so, it only needed one loving embrace of the man, one strong word of reassurance, and the boy would have come to love it also.

He hated the mountains, and the bush, and the flowing streams, because his father loved them. Had his father but loved him first and then the hills, the bush and the streams, they would have lost their terror. The man lacked the wisdom of love. Although the boy could not have verbalised it this way, in a dim way he understood this truth. Had it been fully clear to him, he might have conquered the hate. As it was, the hatred could only increase.

The last part of the ritual was to relive the day when he refused to bushwalk with his father. He would remember the day clearly. No detail would fail his memory. It was always there before him, the beauty of the day. Again he could smell the scents of the hot air, the fragrance of mingled odours, the eucalypts and the flowers, the hot, warm smell of the rich earth. All of it came to him again. He could see the impatience of his father as he beckoned to his

son. 'Let's go' had been his word, but the boy had felt himself to be fighting for his life. Down there he would be stifled. Down there his opportunity for personal love would be destroyed in the passion his father possessed for the hills he loved. In that day he had decided in a desperate platitude that it was 'now or never'. It was then the 'now' became the 'never'.

He had looked up appealingly at the bulk of his father, towering away into the skies, and he had said, 'Dad, I don't want to go. I want to stay here. I want to sit with you.'

His father looked at him, uncomprehending. 'Come on, son,' he had said roughly. 'Don't let's waste time.'

The anger in him had become uncontrollable. 'I don't want to go into the bush,' he had shouted. 'I want you to stay here!'

Each year he would remember the unbelief in his father's eyes. Then would come memory of the parental anger.

'Don't be a little idiot!' his father had shouted. 'Have a bit of guts! Be a man! Come on now! We don't have all day!'

He had wanted to jump up, shout, attack his father, in fact to do anything to destroy the stolid self-control the man had always known. He wanted to break through the cold, uncaring spirit of his parent, but he knew the attempt would be useless. The older person did not understand. That was the way things would always be. So the boy died.

He looked up at the man, his gaze cold and dead. He sat lifeless. He watched the man throw up his

hands in impatience and disdain. He watched him hurry down the trail into the land of the tall gums and the cold, cascading water, as though in a senseless coma. When his father returned, the boy made no show of feeling. Even the curious looks his parent gave him could not stir him.

The ritual was over. The statue returned to life. A curious smile played on his lips as he quietly smelled the dry air, and caught the coming fragments of a new fragrance. The faint smell of smoke was in the air, and it was as though flames leapt merrily in his eyes, and a faint joy pervaded his heart. In a way you might say he was beginning to live.

THE DAY came eventually; the true day. He knew it was the true day, the correct day, the right time, the ripe time. Even without his peculiar mania, anyone could have known it was the day. The days before had ripened it for the right time. They had been days carrying the west winds across the craggy hills. The winds had moved in relentlessly upon the mountains. They had flowed unceasingly, day after day. They had found their ways up along the valleys. Nothing had been untouched. The great tree ferns had been discovered in their hiding places beside the gurgling streams. The delicate creepers had curled up before the hot breath. The pods of the shrubs had exploded, sending their seeds flying to the hot, dry earth. The animals had tensed in their hiding places, and the birds had clung, staring fixedly in their branches, wings held away from their bodies, panting.

In the evenings, when the winds had died away, the whole bush was breathless. No relief came in the hours of the moonlit night. Animals made their way uneasily to the creeks and the pools, but even so, their heart was not in it. They sensed what was ahead, and wondered what they would do about it.

For him, the hot air was like nectar. The throbbing heat was like a nameless joy. His deep, cold hatred had become a consuming love. He surveyed the hills as though he were their master, and they his willing, receptive slaves. Of course, long ago he had rationalised the whole matter. He was serving these ancient mountains. To set them aflame was to regenerate them. They needed his fire. He was their god of preservation. He also knew this to be true, and no wild fantasy. Year after year he had crept out to see them after the fires. They had put forth new life, new growth. They had greened where once they had been blackened. New life was in the air. They lived again when the rains came, and more, even, than before.

Had he been honest, he would have said that the regeneration made him uneasy. In the pit of his gut he had wanted it all to be finished. He had wanted the blackened to lie there, silent, deadened forever. Some part of him had not died altogether. It told him, yearly, that the mountains were indestructible. In a way, he needed this reassurance—hate it though he may—for he needed the action of destruction each year; otherwise he would die forever.

He crept along the paths, not showing his head above the grotesque banksia, the mountain devils, or even the high, dry bush-grass. He gripped tightly the strips of oil-soaked cloth, fragments that were to set

ablaze the tinder-dry world about him. When he had gone far enough into the valley, he cunningly tucked the rags around the dry bushes. He lit each one, slipping from one to the next, and the next, and the next. He gave them only a fleeting glance as they flared and flamed, biting into the stick-dry bushes, crackling up to the oily tips of the highest leaves. He had more to do than to savour the flames. Small flames scarcely interested him. It was a roaring holocaust which he desired to see. He longed for a flaming wall of fire, a devouring, roaring beast of a blaze which would consume the very mountains themselves.

In the mountain townships, they saw with dismay the spiralling smoke. In a moment the clattering helicopter came chopping its way to the first of the smoke. From the watchtowers the firefighters peered through binoculars. Radio programmes were first interrupted to tell the news, and then reprogrammed to feed continuous information. A sickening dread gripped those whose homes were in the bush. They stared apprehensively at the tall gums, the brittle silky oaks, the ferny leaves of the cultured natives, and the high undergrowth which had flourished in the long wet months of the winter. The air itself expanded in anticipation of an explosion of flame. The west wind beat relentlessly, fanning the flames, carrying them like dripping pitch across the treetops, so that they dropped into the valleys and gorges, and raced across the ridges.

The Volunteer Fire Services sprang to life. The great trucks thundered along the valley fire roads. Some climbed to the ridges and set up their camps. The two-way radios crackled with messages and

strange metallic voices. Helicopters flurried their way around mountain peaks, and descended, chattering, into the valleys. Bulldozers roared their way, trampling bush into mangled strips, scarring the soil until it became a blaze of yellow ochre. Above it all the helicopters clattered, sending down showers of water or firebombs to halt the racing wall of flame which was approaching. Inside the houses, on the fringes of town, eyes stared through glass windows, trying to read the pall of smoke about them; seeking to penetrate to see the fences of flame which might soon be about them. Cars were backed out of garages, furniture piled up on lawns. Water was sprayed onto roofs, and the radio and TV spelled out their clipped messages.

He sat beside his own TV. One moment he would be staring, avidly, at its screen. The next moment he would be outside, running to the ridge, seeking the fire across the valley. That he could not see it did not wholly frustrate him. The pall of smoke, so to speak, was both his reward and his incentive. He would rush back to the TV to hear the latest information. He lived when he was told the fire was out of control. He was filled with an horrific joy when he heard the wind had heightened. Despair would come when a fire was beaten, or another contained. He lived again when he heard a house had succumbed to the flames. He never really paused to think about the disaster it would be to the family who lived in it. He simply was urgent about the blackening of the entire mountains.

That was why he sped along the unknown tracks, and ran along the hidden trails, carrying his strips of disaster, feeding them into the dry places, and setting off further destruction. His heart almost sang with the joy of it.

The news came in the early morning of the surrounded firefighters. No one knew what had happened. The firefighters around the mountains were not unduly worried. They knew the team had the best equipment within the whole volunteer movement. They also knew the firemen to be experts. There was no trick or principle within the whole world of firefighting that they did not know. Meanwhile, whilst families prayed on, the police sat with two psychiatrists, trying to work out a pattern of the arsonist, or arsonists. It was dawn when they gave up, temporarily, the task of working out the mind of the maniac. The detective squad from the city was trying to piece together the pattern of the fires, with little success. The helicopters were having a difficult task, the huge pall of smoke across the hills and the valleys obscuring their vision.

He had crept out from the house shortly after midnight. He had driven far from his home, towards the western perimeter of the fires. His satchel was stuffed with the rags. Usually he took only a handful with him, leaving the satchel in the boot of the car. This night he took the satchel. He would attack wherever he could. Some instinct told him that his luck could not hold forever. In other years he had been content with fires spreading through a few of the valleys. He had had his gut filled with delight when these were blackened, but now he wanted

something larger—a total holocaust. The anger within him was being gradually transformed into immense satisfaction, like a total fulfilment. Maybe the psychiatrist would have said the lion was coming out of his lair—forever.

Delight made his hands move deftly; desire made his mind move cunningly. The brooding hatred of years drove him on to quick, expert action. He flicked his cigarette lighter on and off. The flames sped away from him. He was too practised to be caught himself. He was too fleet for the flames; he was their master, not their tool. He hurried deeper into the valley.

It never entered into his mind that he had once feared these valleys, even in the day. His thinking, though coldly logical, was irrational. The image of his father drove him on. He never paused to analyse what he was about. Like others he was driven willy-nilly, not knowing why.

The wind had been with him. The pall of smoke had covered him, drifting in as it was from the other valleys. It covered his tricks. It hung between him and the moon. It made him feel more than justified in his actions. Things were working for him as they always did in this situation. He was possessed with a perverse merriment, so much so that he sang as he worked. Never before had he sung. Now, he knew it was right to sing.

Then the change came. The westerly had died in the evening, much to the relief of the firefighters, but then a new happening began. Right at this point of time, whilst he was moving from point to point with his fragments of fire, the south wind had begun to blow. For a while he had delighted in it, until

something caught at his nostrils. It was not only the cold of the new wind, but the tang of moisture that was on it. For a moment he was appalled, but the reborn anger which came from the hint of rain set him about in a maddened surge of incendiary passion. He pulled the oil-soaked rags one after another, stuffing them into dry grass or bushes, lighting them in scarcely controlled anger. He ran on and on, each time lighting, never waiting to be sure they burned, hastening on in his task.

It was then he made his mistake. Long ago he had worked out his pattern of lighting. He always lit away from the fire. He worked in order to build a wall of flame which would move before the prevailing wind. In his compulsive anger, he lost his sense of direction. He moved back towards where the fire had been during the day. There was no danger, for the fires he had lit were burning away from him into fresh bush that had not been burned. In that sense he was safe.

In another sense, he was moving towards danger. He was moving towards the fruits of his mania, the destruction of the hills, the death of the bush. Rarely had he viewed it as such. Some instinct had warned him that to see this destruction immediately might weaken his powers of hate and lessen his incentives for destruction. So he had always worked in the unburned areas. In this way he could feed his hatred with destructive action. Later, of course, he would survey the burned mountains, but only when they had begun to regenerate—thus enabling his cunning to control the aftermath of conscience.

So he had made his mistake. Suddenly he found

himself in a burned-out area. He plunged on, looking for new material for his petrol lighter. He could find none. All he could find were the charred remains of former trees and shrubs. The thickness of the ashes was under his feet. He could feel his boots grind into burned branches, and all he could hear was the crackling of the ashes as they broke beneath his feet.

He stumbled on, feeling the first lines of fear moving within him. The silence was gathering about him. The roar and rush of the flames was diminished, and the silence was growing. Then the south wind blew hard. It flicked away the pall of smoke surrounding him, and the moonlight began to filter through. Suddenly it was all there, brilliantly flooding the world about him. When he looked up, the stark lines of the blackened trees etched themselves against the glowing sky.

That was when he began to run. He ran towards what he thought was unburned bush. Often he tripped, and once his hands floundered around in the thick ashes. When he looked at them, open-handed, it seemed they looked at him. He ran on, the lines of fear developing into panic. He caught himself sobbing, and the sound of his harsh breath was terrifying in the quiet night.

Then he came to the open ground. For a moment he thought that a team of men had come to take him. In the moonlight the truck loomed large before him. Men were seated around it, as though waiting. If they were waiting, then they were waiting without movement. He stood, his blood pounding, his ears hearing the noise of his heart. Suddenly the outer

silence became eerie. The men were looking at him, not moving.

He noticed the truck was a firefighters' equipment vehicle, but it was not red. It was black, black as the ashes upon his hands. Then he knew what had happened. It had been burned out. And he knew another thing. The silent men were not waiting for him. They were dead. They had been burned to death.

The terror welled up within him. His heart was constricted. His breathing caught itself within his lungs. His entire body began to break out in a cold sweat.

When his breath returned, it was painful. He felt a rasping in his chest. His stomach heaved, and wild sobbing began. He looked about him wildly. All he could see was drear. Nothing spoke to him. Everything kept silence. He could hear his own sobbing, but as though from a distance.

How long he stood there, he would never know. Whilst he stood, the pall began to move over him. He could feel the cold wind against his cheeks, yet he could see the still skeletons of the trees, their fixed limbs awry in the light of the fading moon. It was blackness and light. Then, suddenly, the light had almost gone. He could feel terror and despair come pumping up from some region deep down within him. He caught a final sight of the burned-out truck, the motionless men, frozen by the death that had burned them. Then, in strange movements, the dead men began to move. Their limbs seemed to have come alive. He was not to know that this was rigor-mortis setting in, in its own grisly way. He was not to know that the dead men could not touch him.

There was a lot he was not to know. As the clouds began to spatter down their cold drops, and as the earth prepared to receive its salvation and its regeneration, the crazed pyromaniac began to run in frenzy, to run blindly, to run to where he could run. Yet even he knew, though blindly, that there was no place to which he could run. No place unless there was grace. But then, as he ran on in his own terror, he scarcely knew there was such a thing as grace.

TROUBLE IN THE TOILET

GRANDPA said later that he had never had a birthday like it. He should know, because in his younger years birthdays had been quite a thing for him. They had seemed to mean something out of the ordinary. For example, when he was six he had received—unbelievably—six Nestles chocolates. A kind aunt had done this gracious act, and Grandpa as a slip of a lad had disappeared into the camphor laurels to begin this wonderful chocolate gorge. Mother had different ideas. All her children had always shared everything which had come their way, birthday or no birthday. Grandpa's ideas of justice upon this earth had been shattered. Thereafter he was always unnerved when a gratuitous windfall came his way. Memories of Mother haunted him, and if he sought to enjoy this new liberality, the spectre of Mother's justice had haunted him. I am exaggerating, of course. Grandpa was an ebullient person, and sufficiently resilient to face the gifts of the universe and enjoy them greatly when they came his way.

And now it was his third twenty-first birthday, as he called it. He was sixty-three of course; that is, come Epiphany, which, as everyone knows, is January 6th. For some strange reason Grandpa was not

as canny on this particular birthday as on previous similar occasions. For example, when he was sixty he simply knew there was going to be a special birthday party. There had been such on his fiftieth and his fortieth birthdays, but the thought did not enter his mind that there would be one on his third twenty-first birthday. Perhaps the first effective signs of old age were coming upon him without his knowing it. Anyway, he passed a pleasant enough day, receiving a present or two, a phone call here and there, and an odd friend dropping in to birthday-greet him. Also the friends who shared with him in a publishing venture arranged a mild enough morning tea, which you could have called a party had you thought about it.

For the most part, Grandpa was contented with the day. He pottered around his vegetable garden. He sowed some seed, and reaped a few delectable salad vegetables. He also read. As it happened, there was a test cricket match in progress, and he popped in from time to time to watch the match in progress. Because the scores were going his way, a delightful touch was added to his special day. Even so, he went through the day guileless and unsuspecting. Grandma and he ate an ordinary enough meal in front of the telly whilst the special cricket highlights were replayed. When he finished eating, he used his table napkin, sighed a trifle and stretched. 'Not a bad day,' he commented.

Being an avid reader, he plunged back into a novel he had begun the previous evening. He was faintly conscious that he was enjoying life, but enjoyment is better left in the unconscious realm, so he refused to introspect. Grandma insisted that tonight he need

not help with the washing of the dishes. He leaned back, relaxing in his Jason rocker, his mind somewhere between the satisfying meal and the bland detective yarn before him.

It was then that Grandma bustled in. 'Quick!' she cried. 'Come quickly, and look at what's happened!'

Grandpa was quickly alerted. He knew every note of his dear wife's voice. Even so, this tone puzzled him. It was not quite that of alarm. Certainly it had an element of surprise, but not too much of fear. It was not quite a cry for help, but he knew instinctively that she needed him to come. He reflexively remembered a night of alarm. It had happened two weeks previously. Grandma had lifted her bed shawl from the corner near their bed, and her eyes had fallen on a snake. The snake was a diminutive one. Nevertheless it was a dangerous one. They had both dealt summarily with the invader (never had a snake entered the house in the years they had lived in it), but of course a trifle of shock remained.

'Not another snake?' Grandpa said.

Grandma shook her head. 'Not really.'

She opened the door of their large living room, and it was then the surprise came. They were all standing, looking at him, Grandpa, with delighted eyes. There were Carol and Liz, and their respective husbands, David and Geoffrey. Also there were five grandchildren. Not that they constituted the whole family, but they were enough. The others were a bit far-flung from the city. Dan and Bente—Anne and Erik's children—had come from the country and were staying with Grandpa and Grandma. They had been out for the day with Carol, David, and their

personable son, Timmy. Timmy was shrieking with delight, although he was not wholly sure what the noise was all about. Liz's daughter Danielle was jumping up and down in dynamic enjoyment. She never did things by halves. Now she was screaming out Grandpa's name, time and again. So were Dan and Bente, whilst little Sarah stared with wide eyes but said nothing.

Then they burst into song. 'Happy birthday to you,' they sang to Grandpa, and that oldish-youngish person beamed with delight and surprise, and felt all his emotions were very, very good. Memories of a sixth birthday and forcibly shared chocolate were wholly submerged in this liberality of love.

'Well, what do you know?' he said, when the singing and the cheers were completed. Out of the corner of his eye he had caught sight of a table laden with goodies of all kinds. They all drifted happily to the feast, and noisy celebration rose to decibel heights. They were all congratulating themselves that for once they had tricked Grandpa, and he confessed, time and again, that he must be losing his punch. Not that he ever punched anyone. Not in these days, anyway.

That was when it all happened. I mean the event which was to make the day forever famous. Danielle, of course, had to be the one. Even so, it could have been any one of the others. They were all personable. They all had that kind of initiative in, and of, life that causes unusual things to happen. Proud Grandpa could tell you the stories his young descendants had authored by their unusual actions. He would watch their interplay with delight and pride. So when

Danielle suddenly began her high screaming it was no surprise to him.

High screaming it was, but also—at least to some extent—it was muffled screaming. That is to say, the toilet room was well built. This had always been the state. Children who did not wish to share in washing of the dishes could lock themselves in this noble place, and not hear the crying summons of parent or grandparent. This sort of thing has, of course, existed since time immemorial. The toilet has not suddenly become a place of refuge. Given various names over the years, such as 'loo', 'dunny', 'lav', and 'WC' (Water Closet), it has been the classic retreat for those who ponder, meditate, contemplate, cogitate, speculate and deliberate. What a delicious operation! How relaxed the subject is! What plots for stories, sketches, plays and novels have been hatched in its quiet confines. In this harbour of harbours, this unique asylum, this safe sanctuary, this coveted covert, this happy haven, many embattled spirits have recovered their serenity, added to their tranquillity, and allowed their creative powers to resume their natural fecundity.

I do not claim, of course, that all this was in Danielle's mind when she resorted to the loo. Partly, however, she needed a place of restoration. She had had her fill of the first course, which was salad. She had also had lashings of ice-cream, glasses of rich cordial, and she was now filled full with Smarties, jelly beans and salted peanuts, to say nothing of cake. Her habit was always to fill in the wonted hour without permitting the demands of nature to interrupt her. However—and we all know what this is—

she eventually had to bow to nature and her robust bladder and rush to the place of refuge. Sometimes she barely made it. It was not that she begrudged nature its part in human living, but she so enjoyed social life as to place its demands in second place. Hence the peril of it, the living on the knife edge, so to speak. Yet even this—for her—was another delight to be savoured.

Having obeyed nature's dictates, she settled down for a period of childish meditation. She had the habit of analysing her fellow creatures, beginning with Dad, Mum, Sarah, the cousins, aunts and uncles, and two sets of grandparents. She was a born psychologist, and an indigenous social worker. Also she used her rapidly accumulated knowledge to great advantage. She could manipulate her peers into following her leading, her Grandpa into giving her free access to the strawberry patch, and her Grandma into an endless supply of sultanas, which food she dearly loved. At this moment, however, she was satiated with goodies, and her thinking was on the level of personal power in this great family to which she belonged. She was made of the stuff novelists use when they set out to write interminable sagas.

As she sat, leaning forward somewhat and resting upon her hands, she saw *the button*, the latch button for locking the door. The button was small, smooth, shiny and gleaming. It was in fact a chromed button. By using a little pressure you could push it up, or, conversely, push it down. Danielle tipped herself forward until her feet reached the floor. Upright, and standing then on tiptoe, she was able to press the button upwards. Whether she knew it or not, she

was securely locked inside. She could defy all comers who tried to interrupt her. No one could open that door. The catch was fully secured. It had no counterpart outside which one could turn, such as you have on your VACANT or ENGAGED device.

Now the curious thing about all this is that Grandpa had often given thought to the matter of the chromed button. At various times he had thought it a bit dangerous for children. They could easily lock themselves in, and then not know how to get out. He had said to himself only two weeks before, 'I must somehow get that button off the door.' In his heart he had thought it might be difficult, and although he was not averse to doing things difficult, he was apt to leave such minor details until one day when he would do all minor details that Grandma had accumulated for him. She kept a special list of these, if not on paper, then clearly enough in her mind. So Grandpa had done nothing. And now Danielle had locked herself in.

It was on this wise that Danielle acted. Having meditated for as long as her childish concentration span endured, she had then thought of social renewal. This appealed very much. She had even visualised herself rushing back into the whole group, throwing up her arms, and telling them all something quite inconsequential but very impressive and audience-gripping; like, 'I gave Sarah a large strawberry today!' or, 'I caught two more tadpoles than Bente!'

As she thought of this she became quite excited, and gripped the long handle of the door-latch, seeking to twist it. It remained coldly firm under her impetuous grip. She pulled hard. It resisted. She

pushed it the other way, knowing that some doors do not conform to normal techniques of opening. It resisted that way also. It was stolidly immovable. A mild yet delicious tremor of panic titillated her alert mind. She sought to twist the handle a third time. Nothing gave. Then the first wave of panic flooded her. Never very strong in impulse control, she let a scream rip out of her powerful lungs. That was the muffled noise which one or two heard above the other sounds of merriment and celebration.

Mother Liz looked about. Dannie was gone. She recognised the sound of the scream, or rather its precise note. As every parent knows, there is a powerful message conveyed by the particular note of a scream, such as rage, fear, horror, demand, command, and the like. This was a compound of fear-horror and terror. Liz rushed to the toilet door. Inside, thumpings, batterings, screamings and weepings were going on with great gusto.

‘What’s wrong?’ Mother demanded.

‘I can’t get gut,’ whimpered and worried Danielle.

Horror gripped her Mamma. ‘Did you lock yourself in?’ she cried.

‘No!’ was the response. Liz knew immediately that in fact—despite her protest—Danielle had done this very thing. Danielle was simply saying she had not sinned; it was circumstance which had cruelly overwhelmed her. She refused responsibility for the happening. Danielle was one who generally claimed that wrongdoing on her part was but trifling. One was just overwhelmed by the forces of heredity, environment, and circumstances. What could one small girl do against such powerful forces?

No one was really interested in the ethics. By this time, Grandpa, Grandma, aunts and uncles, with delighted cousins, had come to the toilet door. Had the actress in Danielle been in full possession of her at that moment, she could have been the envy of Sarah Bernhardt, but panic had gripped her. She yelled and yelled. Even so, at rock bottom, there was also a kind of perverse joy.

David was a doctor, and knew what to do on such occasions. He tried out his calm voice. ‘Danielle, ‘he said gently but strongly.

‘Yes?’ she screamed.

‘Do you see a silver button near the handle?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ she said in a high-pitched voice.

‘Just push it clown,’ David said in his even voice.

‘No!’ she said violently. ‘No, I won’t!’

The family exchanged glances. This was going to be difficult.

Grandma was most impressive, but really was only an older and more experienced repeat of David. She got nowhere. Mother Liz, Father Geoffrey, and the combined chiming of all cousinly voices got nowhere. They only served to communicate to Danielle her most desperate situation. She screamed and screamed and screamed.

Grandpa knew that talking was not much good for Danielle. She had gone into great despair. She was in the unhappy horrors. She had gone beyond gentle reasoning. She had guilt about that shiny button and nothing on this earth would induce her to touch it. The only way was to get in through the little window, the window which was high up and

would need a ladder. Geoffrey was dispatched to get the ladder from the garden shed. Meanwhile, Grandpa sought to soothe Danielle.

‘No need to worry,’ he said in his voice which had charmed thousands. ‘We are going to open the door!’

‘How?’ she shouted.

‘We are going to open the door,’ Grandpa said in the voice that had calmed hundreds.

Danielle had great faith in Grandpa, but when panic and despair are regnant, faith has little opportunity for true success. At that moment—amid the tempestuous screams—Geoffrey arrived to report that the ladder was absent from the garden shed. ‘Shoot across to the neighbours,’ Grandpa said urgently. ‘They must have borrowed it.’ It was fortunate that Danielle could not hear the conversation.

The ladder was brought, but the window was securely locked. Also Father Geoffrey could not attract his daughter’s attention in order to calm her. He pressed his face against the window, but she was hidden from him.

Grandpa had gone to the garden shed for a crowbar. On the way he crushed some snails under his feet. He like to do two jobs at the one time. In the wet afternoon the snails had been lured forth by a vagrant shower. So Grandpa chose his steps, crushing underfoot the predators of cabbage and lettuce.

When he arrived back, the screams were now mixed with sobbings and hysterical breathings.

‘Dannie,’ he said, in the calmful voice.

‘Yes?’ she shrieked.

‘I am now going to force open the door,’ he said.

‘Oh! Oh! Oh!’ she screamed. ‘I’ll get hurt!’

‘Just stand back,’ he yelled. ‘Over against the toilet.’

Mother Liz knew a better one. ‘Crouch down near the toilet,’ she said, ‘against the wall.’ There was momentary silence as one small child got into position.

Grandpa gave a slight wince as he attacked his own toilet door. First he levered, getting the tip of the instrument between the door and the jamb. He levered, but there was little purchase. He tried at various points, but with little success. he reversed the crowbar and hammered against the door. Most adults present had watched TV cops and robber shows where the burly cop went back as far as possible, and then—shoulders hunched—rushed the door, whereupon it burst open, etc. Here it was seen to be palpably impossible. Perhaps doors in the land of Oz were stronger than those in the USA. The male adults laughed mirthlessly as they thought of the matter.

Grandpa winced deeply as his tool made deep indentations on the door panel but none on the lock. It remained firmly obdurate. He kept saying, ‘Don’t worry, Dannie, you’ll soon be out.’

She kept shrieking back her total unbelief. Also she bemoaned her horrific situation, whilst mother Liz kept saying sharply, ‘Don’t be silly, Dannie. Grandpa is getting you out.’

Suddenly it happened. Miraculously the door gave a little. Grandpa was able to have more purchase for his formidable weapon. Then, using the skill of his sixty-three years, he levered, pushed, and thrust at the door. It yielded.

It flew open. There, crouched upon the floor, almost hidden behind the S-bend, was the diminutive Danielle. Mighty of voice, forceful of character, she was now a pitiful mite of helpless humanity. She was in fact little more than a fleshly appendage to the stolid S-bend. Even so, as all the faces appeared she rallied. Hers was an incredible recovery rate. Her large and beautiful eyes smiled, charming the assembly. 'I didn't get hurt,' she said, salvaging her dignity and personhood. 'Look how I got behind the toilet!'

'Yes, just look,' murmured her mother.

'Did you press the button?' asked David.

Dannie ignored the pointless question. She uncoiled from behind the toilet bowl. Slightly brushing herself she made a dignified exit. She was soon lost in the remainder of the children. Suddenly they were rushing everywhere, venting their feelings and ignoring the adults, who for their part nodded to one another, staring into the empty toilet, thinking of the drama which had happened and suddenly was no more.

Father Geoffrey surveyed the ruined door, its lock wrenched out, its panel splintered. 'Sorry about that,' he said.

'No worries,' said Grandpa. 'We'll soon have that repaired. A few clamps, a bit of glue, and a new sheet of three-ply over the lot.'

'Fancy,' said David. 'Just like that, eh?'

'Just like that,' said Grandpa.

Grandma said, 'He's pretty good at that sort of thing.' There was more than a trace of pride in her voice. She added, 'After all, sixty-three isn't too old for that.'

'Oh, not too old,' they chorused.

They went into the living room to nibble a few more nuts, and have a few appropriate drinks. Liz stopped trembling inside and Geoffrey thought about putting the ladder back. On the whole they felt gentle and mellow, especially as the far cries of the children reached their ears from the lawn.

'I wonder whether she'll carry this all her life,' Carol mused, looking at sister Liz.

Grandpa felt good. He was going for the macadamia nuts. 'Kids are pretty resilient,' he said.

At that moment a golden streak shot past them. It was Danielle. She came back a moment later. She had been to the toilet. 'I forgot my parts,' she said, giggling. 'I had to go back and get them.' She wiggled into them, hoisted them, jettied through the door and down to where all the children were playing on the lawn.

'Pretty resilient,' agreed Carol, and husband David nodded at that. He wasn't a bad medico, come to think of it.

DOUBLE BAYONETS

He had crept silently enough through the rubber plantation, darting quietly from one tree to the other, using the thick trunks as cover. He would melt into the tree, pressing himself against it, listening for noises. There were noises enough, but not the ones he feared. Sometimes it would be the intermittent sleepy utterance of a duck on a lake, or the grunt of a domestic buffalo, and even the hoot of an owl or the weird cry of the fever-bird—noises he knew and loved—but after the noises there would be silence; lethal quietness.

There would also be the flitting movement of light, the brilliance of fireflies. Often they would move together, in a kind of convoy flight, and sometimes they would look like two eyes approaching. Experience had taught him never to take them for a pair of tiger's eyes. A shot fired in panic might be the end of him. If the enemy were there, following or seeking him out, it might be silent death with a bayonet, or sudden death with the shot of a rifle, or a burst of automatic weapon-fire.

HE WAS looking for Tod. Tod had left the cable truck where they had driven it into the cover of the jungle. He had gone off first, and then later Andy had fol-

lowed. They had gone off into the rubber plantation that flanked the jungle. Because of the moonlight they could move down the rows of trees, dip into the depressions—the long grassed gutters that took away the heavy tropical rain in the monsoon weather—and so move along in them, unseen.

Their job was to find the broken cable and mend it, whether it was on the plantation or in the jungle. Each carried a short coil of covered wire, insulated against the heavy wet, and they could mend a length where some had been cut out. Being their section sergeant he had to give the orders, but since they were a tightly knit team they worked it out together. Because he was their leader he had the responsibility of covering them.

He had waited a long time near the truck, behind the closest jungle giant, silent and listening. There were sounds of war but they were a long way away, far to the west of the main highway, and just tips of noises, the faint, faint echoes of what he knew to be Japanese crackers being set off, and not the deeper noises—rifle fire, automatic bursts of Brens and Tommy-guns, and Japanese light rifles. There were no mortar sounds; this his acute hearing told him.

He remembered the first time they had met the enemy. They were amazed at the antics they were getting up to. The Nips were walking in single file along one side of the road, boots clattering on the smooth bitumen, and they were laughing. It sounded like Army joking and chiacking. The infantry had been told to hold their fire, but the occasion seemed too good to do that sort of thing. The Aussie troops protested in whispers against deferring this glorious

opportunity, and finally the company officer had nodded and the platoons burst into life. The guns crackled along the whole perimeter, flashes lighting up the night, more brilliant than the silver moonlight.

The Japanese ploy had worked. Behind the laughing, chattering line of their soldiers were the silent ones, those who moved in sandshoes, equipped with good firepower. At the first crackle of the Allied rifles and machine-guns, the decoy file of Japs dropped in their tracks, sliding back into the deep water drain, whilst the others behind them let their firepower pour into the enemy. Mortars began their arc of delivery and burst, each explosion of them bringing cries of pain and horror. There was no silence from the Nips. Now they started their maniacal cries of 'Banzai! Banzai!' and other harsh slogans, and masses of firecracker explosions that were terrifying because they sounded like all the demons of hell let loose.

That had been a cruelly expensive exercise, but the Aussie infantry had learned a tactic which warned them against similar operations. They were learning as they were going.

Tony knew the operation to the west was not a full-scale attack, and perhaps the Aussie infantry were silently surrounding the noisy enemy, refusing to be intimidated, declining to have their firepower drawn, waiting for the sure moment before they destroyed the marauders. He did not quite know.

What he did know was that he was uneasy. He felt uneasy for Tod and Andy, and he was not letting

himself be trapped. He understood this other tactic. The enemy would discover a cable. Maybe they would first plug in with some listening device, but if they did they could not catch the messages—not, anyway, without an Allied Fullerphone. After a time they would cut the line, and wait behind a tree or in jungle undergrowth until a detail of Signal men would come to repair the broken cable. The waiting Japs would creep up on them soundlessly, killing them silently with their bayonets or Samurai swords, or—if they dare risk a burst of fire—shoot them down.

Tony knew where the cable was laid. Every detail of its laying was in his mind. That was his job—to know the disposition of line-communication. Tonight he was moving in an arc, always at a distance from the cable. Always hidden, too. Eventually this took him into the jungle, and in the thick undergrowth it was difficult to move noiselessly. It was difficult to move at all.

Every so often there would be an open patch of *lalang* in the jungle. Maybe the wild buffalo made these patches. The sword-like edges of the wiry grass could cut a man's hand, but buffalo tongues ripped it off with ease and swallowed it without difficulty. He stood silently at the edge of the small clearing, and his hearing was alert. After some time his eyes could see an inert figure in the *lalang*. It was a man, short and slumped, and his uniform was Japanese. He lay on his side, arms partly spread-eagled, as though he had died protesting.

He moved quietly, fearing that the dead man was being used as a decoy. He slipped his pistol from its holster, still keeping alert. Now the moonlight was

fully on the dead man and he knelt to look at him. The soldier's rifle lay askew, away from his body, and the short bayonet on it was red with blood. There was blood on the front of his tunic, and Tony saw that he had been stabbed through the back. The Aussie bayonet must have gone right through him, even through the hard thorax. The Signal sergeant felt his stomach gag, but he knew it was no time for softness.

He rolled the man back, and the battle helmet fell off his head, rolling away from him some inches. The man's eyes were staring into nothingness, from nothingness. He was a private soldier, and not an officer. His face was still and drawn. The last agony had set itself like a mask of surprise. Tony felt the gagging again.

He opened the man's tunic, and felt inside. His hand met blood, and he withdrew it, wiping it across the tunic. He had felt a wallet and eventually he avoided the blood and slipped it out. He even wondered why he wanted to look at it. Inside was a wad of Malayan dollars. There were letters in Japanese script, and some photographs. The moonlight was strong enough to see these, but he shielded his torch, cupping his fingers around it, and looked more closely.

One of the photographs was of the dead soldier. Another was of the soldier and a beautiful woman. Then there was the family: two children with the now-dead soldier, and their mother. Tony felt weak as he looked at them. He slipped them back into the wallet, and returned the wallet to the tunic. He took the rifle and threw it noiselessly into the undergrowth. For some moments he stood looking at the dead man, then he turned away. The picture of the

soldier in civilian clothes, his beautiful wife and the staring children made him feel helpless.

He knew the stories of what Japanese had done, especially the officers: how they had come upon wounded men and bayoneted them, or cut them—still living—with their Samurai swords. Only officers carried these swords, and Tony thought of their merciless ways. At the same time he knew this was the Nipponese mind. There was no pity for wounded men: let them die as honourable warriors. Let them be cut up and released into another place.

He slipped back into the jungle, looking now for the signal cable. A few yards on he almost tripped. It was another body his boot had struck. The moonlight had not penetrated here, and he knelt with his torch. What he saw almost caused him to retch. It was Tod. He had been bayoneted a number of times, the back of his tunic in ribbons, and a mass of blood. He was face down, and when Tony could summon up enough strength, he turned him over. It was Tod all right, and Tod's eyes were closed, as though he was asleep.

Tony wept. He wept from his eyes and cried from his chest. Sobs like searing pains racked him. He had never known that he had loved this man so much. The tears flowed hotly and dripped over the face of his mate. He found himself wanting to kiss the dead soldier, but something like despair froze him from doing it. Heat was in his mind, fire was in his heart, but he could only look and do nothing.

After a time he felt the tunic pockets. They were unbuttoned. Tod's side-arms were gone, and his Tommy-gun also. The Japanese had stripped him.

He wondered what had happened to Andy, but he knew the two had moved in tandem, Andy some way behind Tod.

His Signal mind reasserted, and he searched for the cable. His covered torch found it, and he saw what had happened. Tod had crouched down to repair the line. He had stripped back the insulation on both sides of the cut cable, and had made his knot with the copper thread. He could have been covering the join with black insulation tape when he had been bayoneted from behind. Anger suddenly rushed into Tony's gut, and he felt his body on fire with hatred.

He wanted to rush back to the clearing and kick the dead man with his—Tony's—heavy Army boots. He knew it would be a frenzy of anger, an orgy of hatred. At the same time there was a caution, a battle caution. He dared risk no noise. Something made him want to scabble in the deep undergrowth, tearing away the vines and tough scrub so that he could dig with his bayonet and make a grave for his dead mate. He knew the least he could do was to take Tod's identification disk—the 'meat-ticket' as they always jokingly called it—but when he looked for it around the neck of the soldier he saw it was gone.

Anger filled him again. He went back to the dead Jap and searched his tunic pockets, but they were empty. He felt the tears scalding his eyes and face, and he stumbled back to Tod. The best he could do there was to place the fallen helmet over his face, and say the prayers a man ought to say for another victim of war.

After the prayer the thought 'victim of war' was still in his mind, as though it had gotten stuck there

on its way through. A weakness struck him, and he leaned against a tree. All the time he was weeping and thinking, his trained mind was listening for sounds; but there were none.

His mind was in a ferment and fever of thinking. Whether he knew it or not, he was going through the lines of thought that have always come to men in war. The Nipponese footslogger had killed Tod as he was repairing the line. Tod had died because of a cut cable. The small soldier had waited until he was occupied and then bayoneted him in the back. Someone had crept after the killer and killed him. He did not doubt it was Andy. Andy would have been filled with blazing hatred for the Japanese dirty trick. He had seen Andy in other rages, and the sight of them had not been nice; yet Andy was a good friend. He and Tod had been special mates.

What of Andy? Was he lying somewhere in this orgy of silent killing? Had he been bayoneted by some Nipponese mate of the other dead soldier? He did not know. What he knew was that he could not move from where he was until something had been resolved in him. So he sat there, one part of him numbed to deadness, and another part quivering with mixed emotions.

At first he hated the killer of Tod, but then some kind of reasoning told him that that was the job of the man, just as it was—maybe—Andy's job to kill the killer. Tony kept seeing the photographs of the young man in civilian clothes; he looked like any citizen in any country. His wife was extremely beautiful. Her look was one of simplicity and innocence. He could scarcely let himself think of the two children,

and he wondered at the vast stupidity of killing millions of fathers and would-be fathers in all the wars that had happened.

This sort of thinking was not new to him. It was not new to a lot of his mates. He was not a drinker but he went with the men when they drank, and when their tongues were loosed their inner thoughts would come out, and the emergent ideas were sometimes quite convincing. It was only when angers vented themselves that he felt uneasy. He could not trust irrational talk. Yet even in irrationality startling ideas would come. So he knew war was wrong. He thought everyone knew that.

He knew the Army brutalised men. It had to do that sort of thing. It had to brainwash them of centuries of reasonable thinking: respect for the dignity of man, the ideas of love in families, decency in society, good sense in government. All these ideas had to go, or be reshaped under the powerful drives of patriotism, the ethic of protecting one's own people in the face of evil opposition. That is what all called it, on both sides: evil opposition. He had read enough of history to know that there were few—if any—just wars. Racial hatreds often grew out of greed or guilt. They also grew out of the ambitions of leaders of government, enforced ideologies, but somewhere, beneath all these conditioning facts lay an evil he could not understand. He knew it to be the evil of man. It was showing in strange ways, already, under the weeks of strain of the war, but he had seen it long before enlisting. He knew it to be a cancer on the whole body of humanity.

He knew some blamed it on to another unseen,

hidden evil—personal forces that were demonic, manipulations of fallen celestial powers—and he did not doubt these might exist and be dynamic. What worried him was the evil human beings could exercise one against another. He had seen the constant battle of some of the troops to rise higher in the Army, to get office and then higher office, and he knew the rot of competitive ambition was even in his own section—fine a unit though they were.

He rose wearily, knowing he would not resolve the matter which previous generations had not resolved. He stood as a further mark of respect over Tod's body and then let his tears flow afresh as he made his way back to the cable truck. It seemed like a century before he reached it, and when he did he saw it in the jungle: a silent creature all of its own being. He slipped quietly up to it, listening, but there was no sound.

Then he saw Andy. Andy was standing, leaning back against the vehicle, and his whole body was limp. He looked with tired eyes at Tony.

'Let's get out of this, mete,' he said.

Tony got into the cabin and sat to the left of Andy. Andy started up the engine, and they waited to see any movement in the jungle or in the rubber plantation behind them. When there was none, Andy slipped in the clutch and they ground their way out of the jungle—in reverse. They bumped across the plantation itself, and Tony thought how the rubber leaves looked curiously like silver coins under the brilliant moonlight. Even so, there was no poetry in his soul this night.

After a time he said, 'You killed the Jap soldier?'

Andy nodded. 'I did that,' he said briefly.

'You got Tod's things—his weapons, his wallet and

his identification disk?' He could not bring himself to say 'dead-meat ticket'.

'I did that,' Andy agreed.

After a time Tony said, 'Tod would hardly have known what happened.' It was really a question.

Andy was further answering Tony's question. 'Nor did that Nip know what hit trim,' he said savagely. 'He deserved all he got, but there was hardly a cry out of him.'

Tony felt the pointlessness of it all: tit for tat, *quid pro quo*, but nothing of usefulness in it all, or from it all. His common sense and his training told him that was not so.

'I taped over the join,' Tony said. 'I thought it had cost Tod all that, so I finished his job.'

Andy nodded without speaking. Eventually he said, 'Maybe we had better test the line at some point—see if it is through.'

'through' was the special signal word. They pulled off the road and found the cable where they had spewed it from the truck's cable-thrower—up against the first line of the rubber trees. Tony tapped in with the Fullerphone; two needles, one piercing each cable through the insulation. When he tapped the key there was a response. He used the 'Vic-Eddy' call, and gave the code sign. He received the right response. He clicked out the news about Tod, and closed off with 'Vic-Eddy, Vic-Eddy, Ack R.' They drove towards the mobile headquarters.

AFTER a time Andy said, 'I suppose you could say it was worth it: the unit being in communication again — line communication.'

Tony thought about that. He was wondering what would happen to the two bodies in the jungle. Maybe the animals would do something with them. The thought sickened him, but then his trained mind said, 'This is a war,' and he nodded helplessly. He knew he would always remember his attempt in the jungle to somehow make sense out of war.

He kept wondering about Tod's girlfriend, who certainly looked beautiful in the coloured photograph he kept of her in his wallet. He also thought about Tod's people—country folk who souged it out in difficult conditions. Come to think of it, Tod had always souged it out.

Then he thought of the Jap wallet and the photographs and the Malayan dollars. He had stuffed the lot back into the man's tunic. Maybe someone would find them one day.

As the tyres thrummed along the smooth bitumen and some of the gear in the back rattled a bit, he thought about that—about stuffing the wallet back into the man's tunic. In a way it was a kind of tribute to him, and perhaps a tribute to the man's folk back at home. He wondered whether—in their situation—they had had to tough it out. Probably, seeing the man was a lowly footslogger.

Tiredness claimed him eventually, and his head dropped on his chest. Andy was tired also, but he had his own thoughts and they were enough to keep him awake. One doesn't kill a man even in war—and not have thoughts. He wondered whether they might keep him awake forever.

THE BOY WITH THE BARROW

HE HAD first seen her golden hair over the top of a pew. Not that he minded that. There was nothing like a respectable meeting. She had looked around and he had seen her eyes. They were a cornflower-blue, to match the deep gold of her long tresses. He decided at that moment to marry her, although of course not at that moment or in the foreseeable near future. Her delicately chiselled face, with the smooth, slightly turned chin, had set his image for life of the Ideal Woman. He decided that the nose was slightly longer than it really ought to be, but he would excuse this, seeing the rest was perfect. She had turned away after seeing him, and he flipped through *The Book of Common Prayer* to the 'Table of Consanguinity'. Although he did not understand the title, he knew the contents fairly well. It was interesting to read about the persons you could not marry. She was not your Father's Sister, nor your Father's Wife, nor your Brother's Daughter. Come to think of it, who was she?

HE was careful, after the manner of persons in their teens. He kept the set face, the bland look, the steady,

even voice, when he asked the question. He knew that Butch Hemming knew every girl around the place, so he asked.

Butch did know, but he was a little wary of the question. 'Why,' he asked loftily, 'do you want to know?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'No great interest,' he said in a neutral voice; 'just that I'd not seen her before. She's new to this church.'

'But not new to churches generally,' said Butch. 'Most people,' he said, 'know of the Askew-Cunning hams. They're church people.' His knowledge made him quiver a bit. He knew more than this upstart of a Godfrey Graham. So he would let him have it. He went through the whole description, especially the bit about the girl's father being high up in the church, the only true church, the Church of England, of course.

Godfrey Graham kept a straight face, a disinterested expression, and he was unmoved by the social or ecclesiastical greatness of the father of the blonde with the cornflower eyes.

'Oh!' was all he said, and Butch knew, with a sinking feeling, that Graham could put more into one 'Oh!' than could he into all his description. His account trailed away, and he lost himself uneasily amongst the boisterous bunch of male teenagers who were either ogling the other girls or giving them hearty punches on their adolescent arms.

Godfrey likewise melted away. He saw his future bride bend to enter an expensive and low-slung vehicle. Her father hovered over her protectively, although at that point of time no protection seemed

needed. The boy was about to turn away when he saw the mother. The moment he saw her he knew all was lost. No mother like that would easily part with her daughter. She had a business-like look about her which boded ill for young Graham. He breathed heavily, disappointment and disapproval strong within him.

Strangely enough, she looked in his direction, as though she recognised something of character in the clear-eyed but distant boy. He found himself bowing slightly, as he had done in boxing bouts before attacking a worthy opponent. She looked back at him, smiling curiously, and then, suddenly, smiling fully.

It was the smile that did it. He had to turn away, so that he would not reveal his reaction, or, rather, his response. The mother had gripped him powerfully, drawing him to her. He liked her motherliness. He decided immediately she was the Ideal Mother, thereby transferring his hitherto uncontested loyalty from his own mother to this new Mother. It was all so much for him that he moved quickly towards the milling congregation as it spilled from the footpath on to the road, making its way over the road-crossing. He caught a glimpse of Butch's wondering eyes, and then he found himself running down the footpath, hoofing it towards home, and inside his heart was crying out with wonder. He had a glory of joy within him. He knew why, of course: he had fallen in love. What he was not sure of was whether it was with the Mother or the Daughter. He did not greatly care, for he enjoyed this new sensation. It did not matter much that one moment he was gazing into the cornflower-blue eyes of the golden-haired girl,

and the next into the amused and warm eyes of her mother. He kept rushing along the footpath, his knicker-bockered legs moving like steam engine piston-rods, and his heavy boots striking the hard asphalt with flinty sounds.

In this way he reached his home.

SUNDAY lunchtime was a time for caution. With his family you never knew. They were an intuitive race, a prying people. They knew your thoughts almost before you did. Sometimes they knew even better than you did. He had learned to live guardedly. He kept his eyes ridded as he watched his father carve the leg of lamb. He loved the crisp, curling skin that came to the mouth piping hot from the oven. He loved the equally crisp baked potatoes, and the shining green peas, and the rich brown gravy. He decidedly did not like the baked pumpkin, and the white-green of the cabbage. He made his way through the disliked before sinking his teeth into the much liked. So he proceeded through the meal.

After the silence his father said, 'You were home quickly today, Goddie.'

He nodded, being ever so cautious. His father's shrewd eyes worked on, ferreting out his secret. 'Never seen you come home so quickly,' he said. 'You're usually off to your beloved bush, and the birds' nests, the little rabbits, and the special butterflies.'

He kept low, hiding in the furze of his mind.

Mercilessly Jerry, the oldest of his brothers, said, 'He saw a beaus sheila.'

He could kill Jerry. He would one day. He decided

to bluff it out. 'Sheilas!' he cried scornfully. 'You know I have no time for sheilas.'

He heard his mother in the background protesting against a word that did not belong to their special Sydney suburb. You didn't use words like that on the North Shore Line!

Jerry was ignoring Mum and playing up to the humour in Dad's eyes. 'Dad,' he said, 'she was a beauty.' He winked at the rest of the family. 'Wouldn't mind doing a line for her myself.' Mother's fluttering protests were heard in the background. Dad bent over his lamb, and helped himself.

Young Goddie listened to the raucous interchange, and bowed his head before the gales of laughter. He was pitying himself that Jerry was too big to take on with the gloves. A day would come of course, but by that time Jerry would be married and gone. All he hoped fervently was that it was not to his fair-skinned, tilt-chinned, slightly long-nosed blonde.

After the heavy pudding they all departed, most of them to sleep and some of them to sit on the front fence, their legs dangling over its rich chocolate-coloured bricks, for the special pastime of collecting the plate-numbers of the vehicles that flowed past them. In those days they had been few enough, and slow enough for them to collect almost every number. He later remembered the special vehicles they used to see. In his area there were a goodly number of Rolls Royces and other such aristocratic names.

He himself slipped away to his favourite bush. He was soon swallowed up in the tall gums, the thick undergrowth, the cool glades with their Christmas bush, their high tree ferns, and their promise of

Christmas bells to come. He could hear the 'fink! Tink!' of the bellbirds, and the high melody of the calling currawongs. He let himself into all this bliss and ruminated on his new cud of love.

By Monday it had all but gone. The stern reality of High School dealt summarily with him. He put his reluctant head to the dry grindstone of maths. How he hated maths! Next to maths he hated chemistry, with its equations that never worked out. English he loved, and history he worshipped, whilst entomology was his delight and luxury. All in all, the day was not so bad, seeing these last three came in the three final periods. Then, to cap it all, he saw her in the overway of the local station. What is more, she looked at him, clearly, and as though she had met him before.

'Hullo!' he said suddenly, awkwardly, and breathlessly.

'Hullo!' she replied calmly, and effortlessly. 'You were at church yesterday, weren't you?'

'always,' he said, feeling a trifle foolish. 'I mean, I never miss.'

She nodded gently. 'We go every Sunday,' she said. 'We rather like this new church.'

He noticed she had a College uniform, whereas he had no uniform, only his High School hat and badge. He felt a trifle awkward again, a little at a loss.

She seemed not to notice or, anyway, to care about that matter. Her cornflower-blue eyes were better than he remembered. Most of her hair was hidden in the College velour hat, but a flaxen pigtail jutted out a bit behind it. He noticed with satisfaction that she had well-rounded limbs, for all their slimness.

‘Are you walking home?’ he asked.

She tilted her nose a little, and shook her veloured head. ‘Mother comes to get me in the car,’ she said. ‘Only on Wednesdays I walk home.’

He felt a pang of disappointment, and then the thought of Wednesday struck him. ‘Could we walk home Wednesdays?’ he asked.

‘If Mother thinks that is in order,’ she said, a trifle primly.

Suddenly he remembered her mother and his thoughts were mixed. Before he could sort them out, the low-slung limousine drew up alongside the kerb of the overway. He stepped back and saw the remarkable eyes appraising him, crinkling at the corners, and greeting him.

‘You’re the boy,’ the mother of the golden goddess said.

He nodded, unable to cope.

She said simply, ‘If you are going our way, we could give you a lift.’

He could not believe it, even when he was in the vehicle sitting next to the goddess, with only their school cases between them. The car purred off, swinging away from the overway. They glided along the black highway. Sadly enough they reached his home first. However, the time was enough to talk a little, and to reach agreement on his walking the golden Jenny home each Wednesday, provided their trains arrived about the same time. He accepted the thoughtful, warm smile of Jenny’s mother and slipped away ecstatically into his own home. Doubtless his dreaminess was the cause for certain familial comments, and a later near-riot amongst his whistling,

commenting brothers. His spirit was too benign to bear them deep rancour. He was lost in golden tresses and deep-blue eyes.

IT WAS all very new to him. Last week he had scorned the antics of his peers, their researches into the mysteries of Woman, and their boisterous approaches to the bright-eyed females at his local church. He had seen them grow up from tots, as he had been with them, not only in Sunday School, but in Primary School. What could suddenly have happened to them to make them different and now desirable? He could not have thought why—at least, not until he had seen the golden tresses and the special blue eyes. Now he was a goner. He was both troubled and elated by the new and strange emotions which moved within him. He was troubled because he did not know how to handle them; elated because they swept him somewhat beyond himself.

He had to handle the whole matter very carefully. As yet his peers—and he also—were not fully committed to this girl-boy thing. At the best, their ventures were tentative. They were awkward, untutored, almost unnatural. Their true interests lay in sport, in hobbies, and in school relationships. This was before the days of co-education. No one had even dreamed of the golden era which was to dawn upon sunny New South Wales and, eventually, the entire Lucky Country. The boys simply saw a curious feminine mystique contained within the campus and ethos of a girls’ school, whilst the girls were powerfully interested in what the males did, cloistered

away from the protective and predatory instincts of the female sex. That was why he had to walk carefully.

In addition to all of this, there was the family. Families are made specially for prying into the thoughts, feelings, hopes and ambitions of their component members. An unerring discernment is a cursed gift that is distributed to every member. Few families are wholly benign, and Goddie's was not amongst this select few. He had to use the utmost caution and keep on guard at all times without, if possible, appearing to do so. He kept his secret reasonably well.

MORNING time was his special time. Some days he would slip away at first dew. He would be across the lawns, through the shrubbery, climbing through the loose palings of the eastern fence. He would be into the long-bladed grass of the bush, tailing up early-rising birds, catching a cicada before it scaled higher in the trees, and sometimes even catching a few Sydney waxbills in his harmless trap. He loved these 'redheads', and would slip them into his aviary before he went to breakfast, and they would soon orient themselves to the whistling, chattering mass of other finches, doves and cockatiels. They lived with the background of budgie chatter and shrieks.

However, it was his special occupation most mornings which now began to trouble him. This activity was both his joy and his *bête-noire*. It was his joy because he earned money by means of it. It was his frightening beast, black and foreboding, because such a thing was just not done in his swank suburb.

One just did not collect barrow-loads of hot, fresh cow dung, green, rich, and sloppy. His gentle mother became a strong, fierce person when it came to cow manure. She scorned, for the most part, the chaffy texture of horse dung. Whilst it certainly improved the texture of the soil, and with straw made a fine mulch, yet for the production of beautiful roses nothing equalled the undiluted powers of fresh cow manure. What was more, you could make a fine liquid manure with it. This would improve cabbages, caulies, spinach, and give tomatoes a boost that no other additive could equal. Hence Goddie earned, so to speak, a good livelihood by the barrowing of cow manure.

Once he started out after first light, he would slip through the suburban houses on the fringes of the occupied areas, down to Brown's dairy, the undulating paddocks that flowed between full bush and prim suburbia. Apart from a rare tramp or two, who anyway had no social sense, Goddie would not meet a neighbour or friend. He would put on his old moleskins, and slip on some rubber knee-boots. He had a rough flannel shirt to keep him warm in winter or to hang on the barrow handles in summer. The flatmouthed shovel would lie in the barrow and thump out its own song as they travelled over the heavy metal of the bush road, or the rough sandstone of the bush path.

In a way he liked it. He liked not only the threepence he earned from each barrow-load, but also the test of his growing strength as he barrowed it back along the half-mile it required. Having emptied his load in a hurried twist of the barrow he would

trundle it quickly, running the half-mile before he searched out the precious pods that lay in the short paspalum of Brown's dairy. The dairy folk had been happy for him to take it, for they had more cows to the acre than a farm could support. For the most part, of course, they were fed with chaff and grain, in which was mixed special milk-producing foods. However, clearing the dung gave more edible grass to the heavy-uddered cows.

THE EVENT of the Golden Goddess brought misery. The burden of his misery was, 'What if I should ever meet Her or Her Mother when I come carting cow manure?' Ah! That was a special problem. It was not, by any means, that Godfrey was a snob. Not a direct snob, anyway. He may, of course, have been an indirect snob, but in his special suburb it was just not done to cart cow dung. Gardeners had done it, yes, but then that was the work of a gardener. However, even gardeners were not required to forage—if the term be permitted—for the required manure. It was brought to them maybe in dray-loads, or in truckloads, and after it was dumped, they would then barrow it on to the soil. Then they would build their luxuriant gardens and their ferneries, and their brilliant Spring and Autumn shows of flowers.

The misery itself was a challenge. It challenged him to new endeavours to escape being seen. He would rise before first light, seeking out the pungent pods in the faint glow before first light. He could manage at least one barrowing before first light, one at first light, and one just after first light. The fourth,

which was in the full flush of dawn, was his danger barrowing. On this trip his heart was in his mouth. Anyone might come.

Mercifully, no one ever came. He had filled and emptied hundreds of barrow-loads, and nothing had ever happened. The precious threepences had mounted, until his coffers flowed heavily for one so young. He was not anxious to spend it, being frugal by nature. It was also true that he was not parsimonious. He gave good presents in his family, where so many had birthdays and expected Christmas presents in that demanding season. However, he wanted money for more than that. Under these pressures he barrowed on and on.

THEN came the evening when he was invited to a meal at Jenny's home. He was in an agony about it. Perhaps they would expect a return invitation. He did not know how to handle that. There were so many in his family, kindly but curious, benign but given to honest repartee, and merciless if ever the quarry hove in sight. No, he would never be able to cope with that. Besides, Jerry also had an eye for Golden Goddesses, if not for his own Golden Goddess. He must be wary.

He was also in an agony about the meal. For the most part he recognised the various knives, forks and spoons. That is, all but those designed for the fish course. Fascinated by the unusual and highly decorated silver, he made his mistake when he came to the fish. Jenny's mother covered it with a delicious laugh. 'You weren't looking,' she said sweetly to Goddie, and

he loved her fervently. However, he did not know what to do with the knife and fork he had used.

Jenny's father was a good man, but not overly sensitive to the torments youth suffers. He simply stood up silently, took Goddie's eating implements, and substituted the knife and fork needed. He did, however, cover up the moment.

'The church,' he said; 'have you ever thought of it? I mean, have you ever thought of going in for the church?'

Goddie shook his head nervously. No, he had never thought of that. Jenny's father nodded. As an Askew-Cunningham, most of his thoughts were filled with church. In fact his father had been a Diocesan Registrar, and he himself, although in business, was a member of the Diocesan Standing Committee. That was the earthly equivalent to being a member of the Celestial Twenty-Four Elders, each of the latter having a golden crown apiece. He felt it was good for society in general, and persons in particular, to 'go in for' the church. That had always been a good thing.

Goddie, in reply to the question, said that he had thought only of Agriculture: agronomy or entomology, or even soil chemistry and physics; but never the church. Mr Askew-Cunningham reluctantly left the subject. His wife was quite wrought for a time about a number of things. After dinner Goddie gave his box of chocolates to Jenny.

The box was fairly large, beautifully pictured on the front, sealed with gold cellophane, and wrapped around with a rich red and shiny ribbon.

Jenny was entranced. She said, of course, with shy reproach, 'Oh, Goddie, you shouldn't have done it.'

He didn't know what to say in answer, but stared at the box, a bit entranced himself, and most amazed at his own temerity. Also he was deeply interested in the actual contents. Nor was he disappointed. When they came they were little less than gorgeous in their silver-paper wrappings of many colours. They were also in various shapes such as wheat sheaves, bottles, small jars, and then the common or garden ones not in silver paper, ranging from plain round to square, oblong, and bubbled—the latter being chocolate-covered nuts.

Jenny's mother kissed him. She must have known it was his first great adventure into giving to a girl. She covered his deep embarrassment by taking him out to see her conservatory. She showed him a variety of waxy plants, and also her orchids. Then she said, gently, 'You really like my Jenny, don't you?'

He went flaming scarlet in the face, and around the neck. He felt his cheeks to be hot and his scalp to be prickling. He stammered words without forming a sentence.

'Now! Now!' she said gently, 'that's nothing at all. Nothing wrong about that.' She suddenly stopped and kissed his scarlet cheeks. 'Just don't get hurt,' she said, 'if it doesn't turn out the way you want it.'

He looked at her, agonised. 'Will her Dad expect me to go into the church?' he asked.

She tried not to laugh at his mournful looks. 'I'm sure that's not the case,' she said warmly. 'No, you just forget all about that, but don't go too deeply into friendship with Jenny.' She took pity on him. 'You are both still children,' she said. 'Give yourselves time.'

Jenny's father undertook to teach him chess. After

a time his wife stopped the game. 'Let's sing around the pianola,' she suggested.

Goddie had never seen a pianola. He had heard about them, though. He watched, fascinated, as Jenny pumped the pedals, and the silver cylinder with its punched paper roll turned methodically, letting the even silver notes ripple out. However, what amazed him most of all were the sonorous notes of Askew-Cunningham, as he sang such items as 'The Holy City' and 'The Stranger of Galilee'. For Goddie it was a most moving experience. He even had tears. So did Jenny and her mother, but they issued from a rather curious sense of humour. Goddie did not quite understand. Askew-Cunningham, however, caught the sense of affinity and steered Goddie into a quiet corner.

'It's good to have you with us, Godfrey,' he said, nodding his head quite emphatically. 'Mind you,' he warned gently, 'I'm not sure that our Jenny is much interested in grasses or insects or soils. You will have to think about that. I fancy she is rather interested in the Bright Lights. She is a very social and cultured young lady, I can tell you.'

Goddie's misery could not have been deeper. Come to think of it, he could not see Jenny slipping through the early dawn, bathing her legs knee high in the morning dew, and watching the sun come over the calving of one of Brown's dairy cows. It just didn't fit Jenny. But then she was more in the line of a goddess than a girl. His misery deepened.

Nor was he comforted when the family enjoyed the chocolates. That should have been an omen of high happiness, but it was not. Suddenly he saw that all

the threepences he had spent equalled the number of barrow-loads of cow dung he had trundled from Brown's to home. It was a frightening thought. If they should ask him how he had managed to buy a present so expensive, then he could not rightly tell them that the chocolates represented some hundredweights of sloppy cow dung. It did not occur to him that this was prime humour, the highest level of rich fun. No, he was paralysed with fright, frozen with fear, and wanted to rise up and flee.

They kept him to the last, that is, to a fine supper, with the choice of many soft drinks, milk, or tea and coffee. He scarcely ate a thing. He lived in a covered panic. He wondered how he had gotten to the Askew-Cunninghams. The whole event seemed like a nightmare. He had aimed high, and had arrived, but having arrived he knew it was all beyond him. All he wanted to do was to return to his ordinary and happy way of life. The wretchedness of the whole thing was that he knew he could never again be contented with what had been, and he could never, never cope with what had now happened.

MORNING after morning he stuck doggedly to his hated task. It was not that he was gripped with a passion for money, nor even that he did not wish to disappoint his grateful mother. It was that he knew a principle was at stake. Askew-Cunninghams or no Askew-Cunninghams, swank suburb or no swank suburb, nothing should demean a man. He knew cow dung was God's gift to enthusiastic gardeners. He knew that the task was honourable, no matter what

people thought. Yet the truth was he had deep feelings of shame, and he was even more deeply ashamed of feeling shame. He had no way of knowing that some supreme test was taking place in his life. He had no way of knowing that the Celestial Elders who care for all creation were watching with deep interest as to how he would handle the matter of human pride. Nor could he know that the lesser creatures who are permitted to be spectators in the ever-continuing drama of love were curious to know how this mortal would handle this divine creature who had struck at his heart. Hence, though the boy thought the whole matter mundane and irrelevant to others, others watched the drama with bated breath. Well, anyway, they were most intrigued.

HE HAD decided he would trundle his barrow in the daylight. He had hated himself for underground activities, for his clandestine spirit, for his secret actions. So he came out into the broad daylight with his ministry of manure. Moreover he wheeled the barrow in the centre of the road. In that way, when he came to the suburban homes with their gardeners and owners, all could see him for what he was. Not that many, if any, did. It was still early in the morning, as he had to manage his work before breakfast and catch his train to school.

What he had dreaded came to pass. In a way he had always known it was fated. He had imagined the scene many times. If it were not Jenny then it would be Mrs Askew-Cunningham, and if not her then Father Askew-Cunningham. They would, of course,

know him on sight. They would look at the barrow, the quivering load of its contents, and they would get more than a whiff of its strong smell. They would put one and one together and make two or more. Then they would give him a hurried, though kindly look, and that would be that. He had been through the agony many times.

It was Jenny's mother. It was the neatly but expensively dressed wife of Askew-Cunningham herself, and she, in Angora-wool sweater, rough tweed skirt, and expensive brogues, was walking graciously though quickly over the metal of the road, until she almost ran into Goddie himself. He had his hat pulled down, his unbuttoned sleeves swinging from the elbows, and his knee-boots covered with the sloppy ingredient of his barrow. He knew it was no use trying to slither past. The thing which he had long feared had come upon him. Life, henceforth, was blasted. His Golden Goddess would look but coldly upon him. All was finished. And he meant *all!*

Mrs Askew-Cunningham had scarcely seen the boy. She was occupied with the scents of that morning. She liked the half damp smell of the early dawn. She saw wisps of mist being lost in the upper regions of the tall gums. She could smell the things from the bush, things she could never have named but which Goddie could have told her in a moment, rattling off their common names and even their botanical designations. He could have taken her in and shown her the bottle-shaped nests of the waxbills, the cocoon-shaped nests of the tits, and the cup-shaped nests of the martins. He could have done this and more. Instead he stood on the road, head looking down and

hands gripping the handles of his dung-wagon.

Mrs Askew-Cunningham sniffed the acrid smell of the cow dung. At first she didn't know what it was. The smell brought a host of memories to her, memories which would have surprised young Goddie; but then, he wasn't to know. Suddenly she was in another place with her memories and so when she looked at Goddie she scarcely knew who he was, so dreamy was her look.

Then she said it, with sudden surprise: 'Goddie!'

Miserably he tried to analyse the tone, but his misery was so deep that his discernment was neutralised. He stood there, keeping his face under his hat.

She stooped and looked under the hat. 'Goddie,' she said, 'how strange, meeting you!'

He said nothing. He wondered why she was there, so early in the morning. Really, underneath it all he knew. It had been fated even from before his birth. It had to be a mother like this who had a daughter like Jenny. She had to meet him in these most humiliating circumstances.

'Humiliating circumstances!' even as the thought came in to his mind by one door, indignation entered by another. Humiliating indeed! He wasn't going to be humiliated. His eyes hardened. And hardened they would have remained, but she smiled at him. The smile undid him. He wanted to cry. Instead he returned to his misery.

She said, 'Do you often come out this early?' when he nodded dumbly she said, 'What a wonderful time of the day. I envy you.'

One thing he didn't want was patronage. No Graham could ever stand patronage. For that matter,

most of the Land of Oz could not stand patronage. So he remained silent.

As yet she did not understand. She had not been patronising; only thinking aloud. Then she said brightly, 'Do you know why I am out so early?'

He didn't know, so she continued in the same bright tone. 'To get away from the Church,' she said.

That baffled him. The thrust went over him. He missed the point.

'The Church,' she said again. 'The Askew-Cunningham's eternal Church.'

He thought he understood. Something stirred in the depths of his numbness. At least it was conversation at a difficult time. 'Don't you go much on the Church?' he asked gruffly.

She heard the gruffness. As it registered, she decided to forget the church.

'That's cow dung,' she said. 'That's fantastic for gardens.'

He nodded, wary of patronage. 'That's right,' he said. 'It's good for gardens.'

She said gently, 'What do you do with it, Goddie?'

An imp in him wanted to say, 'Eat it, of course. What do you think?'

Instead he said, 'It's for my Mum's garden. She grows beautiful roses.' The bit about the roses had slipped out. Now it sounded like self-justification; so he said gruffly, 'Mum gives me threepence a load.'

'I don't want to be in competition with your mother,' she said, 'but I'd give a shilling any day.'

He didn't know how to take that. There was no tone of patronising. He felt she wasn't trying to cover his embarrassment. In fact it was slowly dawning

on him that she was human. He had often wondered who was human in his swank suburb.

'You mean that?' he asked, and then lowered his eyes again, because he knew she did.

Suddenly she understood. What had not been in her mind she now comprehended was in his. She was not Jenny's mother for nothing. She hadn't knocked him over like a ninepin on that first day for nothing. She knew twenty-four carat when she saw it.

'I believe you're embarrassed,' she said, and he was. He went a flaming red in the cheeks, a hot scarlet all over his face and neck. She clapped her hands and stood back, the same hands on her hips.

'Well I never!' she said, staring down at him.

He didn't know what to make of that, so he just stared at the barrow.

'Why,' she asked him, 'are you embarrassed?'

For a moment he kept his peace, and then he told her. He told her in a flow of words that poured out until they became a torrent. He told her how he had wanted to earn his threepences, and help his Mum, and how he liked the roses, but he dreaded the sort of thing that had now happened. He talked about his love of the bush, his love of the cows, and how this was what he wanted beyond all things, but it all seemed so foreign to the people who lived here on the very edge of it.

'What a lot of inverted snobs!' she said. Then she looked at him. 'Are you sure this isn't just in your imagination?' she asked.

He shook his head. He told her the proof. Suddenly her Angora arm was around his shoulder, and her soft lips were on one ear, and she said something.

He was startled. He looked at her, unbelievably. She had repeated the same startling sentence about snobs but she had added another word, a word which he knew, which was very Australian but which ladies of the North Shore never uttered; not in those days, anyway.

Instead of being saddened, he was highly delighted. The same warm feeling that had flooded him when he had seen her beside the low-slung limousine was loosed in him again. In fact his eyes shone. 'You mean that?' he said incredulously.

'Of course I do,' she said sharply. Then she kissed him.

It was more than he could stand. He took his hat off, threw it on the ground and walked away, shaking his head furiously so that the tears would drop away quickly and not be noticed.

'Gee!' he said in his voice of incredulity. 'Gee! Hey, what do you know!'

He picked up his hat, wrung it in his hands, and then threw it down again.

'You just can't believe it,' he said.

Before he knew it he had put his arms around her, and she around him, and they were standing in the centre of the road, next to the barrow of soft dung, and hugging like mother and son.

When they stopped, he looked at her. 'Would you let me give you this barrow-load?' he asked. She nodded. 'It's a gift, mind,' he said.

She agreed. Then she said softly, 'And one day you might get me a barrow of bush humus.'

'Know where I can get barrow-loads,' he said. 'Right under the high tree ferns.'

Her lips rounded. 'Humus and manure,' she sighed. 'What a combination!' Then she shook a finger at him. 'But a shilling a barrow-load,' she insisted, 'otherwise I don't take it.'

'After this first barrow-load of cow dung,' he said, 'and after the first barrow-load of bush humus.'

She nodded happily. 'Goddie,' she said, 'you're wonderful.'

He didn't really know whom he loved the most, the Golden Goddess or this most unusual woman, smartly dressed in her Angora and tweed and brown brogues.

'You couldn't give a better gift,' she said. She paused, thinking, comparing in her mind.

'Even better,' she said, 'than a box of chocolates—a box of chocolates with variegated silver paper, and covered with golden cellophane.'

They both walked in silence as he pushed the barrow, but he wondered how you could hold so much ecstasy without expressing it in sighs of wonder. He found it hard to hold on to the silence.

THE MATTER OF SAM SU AND SPECIAL SNAILS

Colonel Anthony Lethbridge said to his second in command, Major Allan McTavish, 'Major McTavish, it simply won't do to let this sort of thing go on.' And of course the good major agreed with his commanding officer.

He said, 'Sir, we must certainly do something about it.'

On that note they both conferred as to what they must do about it.

At such times the friendliness of the two ranks of officers became almost intimate. Their emblems of office—the swizzle sticks—would be laid on the desk between them, and the Colonel would face the Major across the desk, and they would see what offenders could be made to be in danger of being placed on charge sheets. I hope you will forgive that last rather clumsy sentence: it is the sort of officialese you will find in Daily Routine Orders if the thing is done in proper army fashion, and if in accordance with *The King's Rules and Regulations* which is known in these days as *The Queen's Rules and Regulations*.

The problem that Colonel Lethbridge and Major McTavish had in the report I am about to give was no

small one, and I shall have to take pains in properly describing the situation and environment in which difficulties were envisaged and had to be overcome. First, however, I must cover myself by the following explanation, which will (i) preserve my anonymity, and (ii) in no way defame those betters who have been set over us for the 'good order and discipline of the troops'. Many of those troops no longer exist as anything but well-remembered comrades, but they are the old soldiers who never die, and who are the immortals of our memories.

YOU MUST realise from the beginning of this exercise—this story—that almost all the characters, persons, places and incidents are almost entirely, if not wholly, fictitious. It is better that we think of these things this way, rather than have something for the Enemy to fasten upon us and put us on a Charge Sheet, and have us marched—even frog-marched—to the Commanding Officer's office, there to face him who must be obeyed. There are things to be said about the Enemy which must be reasonably disguised so that those of us who are under the Enemy, or even over the Enemy, cannot be detected, named, indicted and punished. Whilst this may cheat the aforesaid Enemy, it may yet be said to be beneficial for the good conduct and order of the Troops—a thought which is often expressed in the bible of the army Hierarchs, namely the volume aforementioned, i.e. *The Queen's Rules and Regulations*.

I must also describe what I have called the Enemy. The Enemy is the authority which is above one—no

matter what form or forms it may take. The Enemy is also those over whom one has to exercise authority. If you are on the lowest rung or plane, then you have only one Enemy: all who are over you. If you are somehow under some, and over some, then you are the meat in the Authority sandwich. The Enemy is above and the Enemy is below.

Having written this, there is still the ancient uneasiness in regard to the Enemy which had its genesis, no doubt, before the days of recruitment to the army, represented by such characters and persons as parents (especially the male one), teachers, policemen, and lesser breeds such as shire clerks, councillors and elected representatives of the governors. In those old days nothing was more designed to put terror in the heart than receiving mail on which was primed 'On His Majesty's Service'. The fact that over the years this has changed to 'On Her Majesty's Service' has done little or nothing to lessen the terror.

I have only one more thing to say before I launch into my fictitious tale, and it is this: no matter where you go, or however long you live, there is always (i) the Enemy above, and (ii) the Enemy below. This will always be so in life, and my advice is, 'Learn to live with this fact. Learn how to accommodate to it. Whilst this may involve a certain amount of compromise and/or cunning, it can be achieved; but it takes skill, and such skill does not come naturally. Yes, it has to be achieved.'

Let me put it like this: here am I, in great caution writing a story about Authority, and although I have been decanted from the army some forty years and

more, I am still strongly conditioned when I meet a demobbed officer of my former unit to call him 'Sir', and this in spite of the fact that socially, economically and vocationally I may be more in the upper crust than he is. I know in his heart he insists that I verbally salute him, and resume the old relationship of inferior to superior. I put on an outward face of indifference—a pose of the vanishment of the former statuses of us both—but the psychological pressure is there. I fight valiantly to call him 'Joe' all the time. He fights equally never to have it this way, and to insist that like the law of the Medes and Persians nothing can change. I have known men who have long been demobbed who still insist on being called 'Brigadier' or 'Colonel' or 'Major'. I have noticed that as you go down the scale that insistence tails off. For example, I have never met one who still insists on the title 'Lance-corporal', which is not funny, if you think about it seriously.

To RESUME our story: Colonel Lethbridge and his offsider were in a Japanese prisoner of war camp and were being faced with a problem which at first sight seemed insurmountable. It was that a predator was in the midst of the troops—the troops who were sick, wounded, disabled, and generally unable to fend for themselves. There were also those amongst the troops who could fend for themselves, especially those who went outside the bounds of the perimeter barbed wire and who were clever enough to slip through even while the Japanese guards were on their rounds. The latter adventurers were not so

much in the minds of the two officers, because the problem that faced them concerned coconut trees.

Call them 'trees' or 'palms'—it makes no difference—these sources of coconuts were growing on the prison campus. The first claim upon them was that of the hospital. Coconuts are full of protein and nourishment. Sick and wounded men are greatly benefited by them. If the supply of coconuts can extend to convalescents and the non-sick, then so much the better. What is as clear as a pikestaff—or an erstwhile bayonet—is that no predator should be allowed to filch this valuable commodity.

The truth was that there was a predator, and one of extreme cunning. Coconuts would disappear, and the internal guards—in this case fellow soldiers of the Allied prisoners—could not catch the offender.

I MUST pause now and put you fully in the picture. You might think that, when all troops were prisoners of war, there would be such camaraderie that the former distinctions of officer and men would be dissolved, that distinctive categories of 'officers and other ranks' would be abolished and mateship would obtain for one and all, but this would have been tantamount to opening Buckingham Palace to the public, and obliterating all rank and file designation and even general law and order. No: the hierarchical order must always be maintained in the interests of the whole community. Democracy is good—it is even fine and commendable as a concept or a dream—but you can take democracy too far, and so bring society to a shambles.

In the confusion of defeat—the time of the first flush of victory by the Imperial Japanese Army— there was a sort of flowing together of all troops, but two factors changed things societally. The first was that the Japanese Command insisted that the prisoners conduct their own discipline within the prison camps, thus relieving a large number of Nipponese troops to be used in further fighting elsewhere. The second factor was that the old inbuilt and wholly conditioned ‘rank and file’ order which should be looked upon in much the same light as the doctrine of ‘tine divine right of kings’ was in its heyday.

At first there was a difficulty. Some of the men of ‘private’-‘gunner’-‘sapper’-‘signalman’ designation— known as ‘other ranks’—had proved themselves superior to some of their officers during the time of action. Of course, many officers proved themselves to be men of integrity, efficiency and bravery also, but there was a bit of sorting out to do—a kind of reinstatement of failed officers on the basis that ‘You do not salute the officer as a man, but you salute his office.’ In fact, this meant ‘You salute the King/Queen’, and nothing can change that! Fair enough; some kind of discipline was needed, and so elements of the old system were re-established. Officers were still to be saluted. An Orderly Room was to be established. Routine Orders were to be formulated, printed, and to be read on the unit noticeboard, daily, by all troops.

By nature of the case, much of this was an *ad hoc* arrangement. An Orderly Room might simply be the end of a hut where certain officers cuffed. In some cases there was even an office which the Imperial Japanese Army (henceforth in this story ‘the IJA’)

permitted, so that discipline could be maintained. So, on the whole, the old system obtained within a prison camp, and made life workable, if not always delightful.

COLONEL Lethbridge on this particular day was in an affable mood, and called his Major by his Christian name.

‘Allen,’ he said, ‘how can we catch this brighter?’ It makes my blood boil to think of the fellow getting away with all those coconuts.’

Allan McTavish—if the truth must be known— had a deep, personal craving for a coconut. At night he would lie on his hard bunk, and visualise having a whole coconut all to himself. In his mind he had often gone through the routine of stripping it of its outward husk, and of piercing the nut itself with some sharp instrument. After this he would pour out the precious milk into a container. Then he would grind the kernel into a mass of pap, and having placed it in another vessel he would pour the milk back into the desiccated flesh. He would then mix and mix, and having done this would squeeze the whole pulp so that the heavenly fluid called *sam su* would be manufactured. Anyone who has drunk *sam su* can never forget its unique, delectable taste. In the best gourmet dreams one will think of *sam su*. So, Allan McTavish would torment himself with the thought of, and desire for, *sam su*.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘we must do all to catch this devilish thief.’

So they did all they could to catch him. They had

their own night-guards lie in wait in darkness. Lacking modern means of communication such as radiophone and the like, they had to work to an agreed ritual of capture, but the miscreant always evaded them. You would think you could never miss a person shinning up a tall coconut palm, but in all but this one exceptional case, you would be wrong.

ONE early morning, just before dawn broke, a prisoner was apprehended at the foot of a well-laden coconut palm. It must be noted that he was looking up the tree, but had not yet begun to shin up it. Without waiting for him to do that, guards converged upon him from all sides. In a trice they had him and he was locked in what was a prison-within-a-prison, a sort of improvised guardhouse.

When Colonel Lethbridge and his Major met for a conference, they were faced with what seemed an insurmountable difficulty. The guards, in their eagerness, had grabbed the man precipitately. He had not yet shinned up the tree. He had not purloined a coconut. In fact, to all appearances he was innocent. This, however, was only half the story. The other half was that for many months this very person had been suspected to be the culprit. In conformity with all thieves and robbers, he was a rebel of the rebels. He was insolent towards officers—though in a guarded way. He had not lost weight as had most prisoners. In short, he was a lawless fellow, living on the common wealth of coconut trees, but giving no return to the community of prisoners.

Whilst the case warranted a court-martial, the

Colonel was far too clever to do that. It would mean appointing a defence lawyer, and the officers knew they would never make the charge stick. The thought of that was intolerable. It had to be a matter for the Commanding Officer's decision, and such punishment which would fit the crime. Let the fellow get away with it, and there was no knowing where it would end.

Johnny Sinclair was an officer, though only a captain, but he had been known as a brilliant lawyer in Sydney, and was in fact the Intelligence Officer of this battalion unit. They decided to call him in, which they did.

The much puzzled Colonel had prepared some of his precious coffee to encourage Johnny Sinclair towards a solution, and Sinclair drank the coffee with much enjoyment, and little finesse.

As soon as he heard the story he smiled, and the Colonel knew victory was in sight.

'Colonel,' he said, 'you have the perfect charge. You have undoubtedly got this fellow. In other circumstances than ours it might sound ridiculous, but the law has to be used to defend us all.'

The Colonel nodded eagerly: these were precisely his sentiments. 'What charge then may we make which will stick, Sinclair?'

The Captain drained his cup to its last drop. He would dearly have loved the Colonel to have given him another cup, but that was out of the question.

'The charge would be,' he said, "*Looking up a coconut tree with intent to steal.*"

There was silence in the Orderly Room. All present were amazed at the brilliance of their Intelli-

gence Officer. Peace broke out, and, with it, great joy. 'Marvellous!' breathed the Colonel, and the Major nodded his own joy.

'Bring in the prisoner!' commended the Colonel.

The guards saluted, clicked their rubber-tire sandals together, collected the prisoner, and marched him in.

The accused was definitely confident that he would get off scot-free, and live to purloin coconuts another day, but when he heard the charge, all the insouciance which had been his immediately evaporated. He realised he was beaten. Remorse for stealing he may not have had, but common sense told him he would never beat this charge. It was legally, technically and undeniably correct.

How right he was!

I REALLY must not keep up the tale of these two earnest officers. There were others also, even in the same camp, because there were other units and so charges for petty crimes. The story I am about to tell is of something which had to be dealt with by Central Command—that impressive body which kept law and order throughout the whole camp. Names will not here be mentioned, but you must agree that the problem was of a major nature. It went something like this.

WHEN the sad and sorry troops who had been defeated by the IJA made their way to Changi Prisoner of War Camp, there were those who had not let

their sorrow totally overwhelm them. Some had gathered up a supply of novels or non-fiction books. Others had packed their haversacks with tinned food. One man had gathered twelve new Remington portable typewriters. Being a sergeant-major, he had commandeered a truck to transport his luggage to the new camp. Some had brought livestock with them—a dog or two here and there—and then yet others, some hens and ducks. Each did this according to his personal predilections. When all the fuss had died down, and—so to speak—normal life came to the vast prison campus, then a phenomenon emerged, namely that owners of ducks were almost all officers. A little improvisation here and there, a trifle of wire netting or a crude collection of boards, and your duck was your boon companion. This was especially so if it was a layer of eggs. Those are details we do not need to go into. Incredibly enough, the Japanese captors did not forbid this keeping of poultry.

There was a great problem of course: the one of feeding the birds. Green-feed was not a difficult thing to get, especially for those who went out daily on working parties. Grass and leaves of a certain kind could provide that need; but it was the other more substantial fodder which was needed, and certainly no one was likely to surrender rice or the occasional dried fish which came his way, or even his 'shadow soup', that is, soup over which the shadow of the vegetables had passed.

Conveniently enough, the Japanese introduced a large land snail which looked to be very much like a large sea snail. These spread rapidly throughout the Island. They were quite tasty as food for humans,

especially humans who were prisoners of war. When possible, some prisoners ate cats, dogs and rats, but such eating was for the more privileged, those who had some spare cash from somewhere. Cats, dogs and rats I never did eat, but I was given snail, seethed until the slime was well out of it, and then cooked in palm oil so that it tasted like fried liver. Unfortunately, this happened only once in my case.

In the case of ducks, snails were a daily dietary adventure. The officers who owned ducks were pleased to pay a cent or so for each snail brought back by men on working parties. So the supply of eggs and ducklings was maintained and even enlarged; that is, until the economics of the snail market changed. The hidden military Mafia moved in and snails became a racket. Whereas—formerly—you might be given a few snails as a gift, or you might be charged one cent in Japanese dollar currency, suddenly snails were scarce, and you could not get them at less than two cents. The price then rose to three cents, by which time there was alarm amongst the duck-men.

A serious conference was held. The Camp Commandant—internal, Allied—chaired the conference of concerned officers, and listened to the ways and means that were suggested to combat this evil racket that was growing. Finally a brilliant idea was hit upon.

Next day a Routine Order was issued: 'Licences will be issued to snail vendors. The price of snails will henceforth not exceed two cents. Anyone selling above the legal price will be prosecuted. Any one selling snails without a licence will be severely punished.

Licences are available from the Main Camp Office.' The important RO was signed by the Commandant.

The humour of it spread through the camp. The troops thought it hilarious. Crowds gathered outside the Commandant's Office when the applications were made for licences. Rough Aussie humour abounded when a triumphant licensed vendor emerged from the office, holding high his licence and waving it to the cheering onlookers.

Doubtless the hidden Mafia were cowed as a great racket was exposed and crushed—all in, and by, one Routine Order. Alas, a profit was made in the purchase of licences, and as snails were secreted and sold on the internal black market, value rose at five cents and beyond. Of course, the price of eggs also rose, and guileless prisoners were being well-tutored for the commercial world into which they would go, should they ever be released.

Sad to say, there were those who were caught selling snails without a licence, or selling them with a licence but at black market prices. Even so, the ducks survived, though of course at greater cost.

AT THE last there are but a few sad things to be recorded, and these emerged from what has been called 'Aussie initiative'. Take, for example, the scarcity of flints for cigarette lighters. Few owned such a luxury as a petrol lighter. Those who had brought one into the camp had already gladly flogged it in the black market.

Some American prisoners were brought into the camp, and they were, for the most part, luxury livers.

They had their own racketeering business, but lighter-flints were almost unavailable. Petrol could be surreptitiously milked from a visiting Nipponese officer's car, but lighter-flints were as scarce as hen's teeth. The ingenuity of some Aussies was not to be beaten in supplying this most valuable commodity. Having obtained a sample of a flint, they were able to manufacture what seemed to be wholly identical from the equivalent gauge fencing wire. Mind you, fencing wire was not readily available either, but they found it.

The Yanks, as they were called by all, howled with anger when they found they were diddled, but they bore no animosity. They, too, entered the same business, though it was outside the barbed wire. The business that they did not know was going on was the manufacture of sulphur tablets, and similar tablets—all with brands of Western drug firms—from plaster of Paris with appropriate colouring. As these were supposed to be a cure for certain diseases, the Japanese bought them with alacrity and themselves did a roaring trade reselling some of the stock.

It seems a pity to close on this note of the deceit and treachery of the human race, but that was not all to do with what happened. It was a part, but not even a major part. Ambition in the fighting forces and insistence upon rank are not things which are confined to those services. When we think of the volume of legislation which passes through our parliaments and backs up in the multifarious volumes which adorn the shelves of solicitors, lawyers, barristers,

Queen's Counsellors, magistrates and judges, then the quaint stories we have told are really minimal in a world which is often over-serious and cannot laugh at its huge pride and its weight of humorous traditions.

This is why we have cartoonists, and there are cartoonists who sketch, who draw, who paint, and there are cartoonists who write. Most show the absurdity of taking all things too seriously, but sometimes they put their finger on the sensitive nerves of human pomposity, human failure, and even dangerous human endeavour. Our professional and volunteer clowns are not absent from this debunking of human pride and human stupidity, and sometimes our entertainers tell us to set aside our over-seriousness for the moment and join in the laughter which leads to peaceful sleep, and fresh new days.

The story of how the Aussie concert party brought great relief and side-splitting laughter to men in a cruel and perilous position may yet receive the highest accolade of all.

COLONEL Anthony Lethbridge said to his 2IC, 'Allen, I think we have things pretty well in hand these days, don't you?'

Major Allan Lethbridge agreed warmly. 'Yes, sir, I believe we have.'

'No coconuts going to the wrong source, eh?'

'Scarcely a one,' said McTavish truthfully.

The Colonel's eyebrows were raised, 'Scarcely a one?' he asked. 'What does that mean?'

The Major coughed discreetly. He looked around to

see whether any listener might be in sight. 'To tell the truth, Colonel,' he said, 'I have a whole coconut under my bed. Concealed, of course.'

The Colonel looked troubled. 'How did you come by that?' he asked.

'You wouldn't believe it, sir,' he said, 'but the chap we put in the guardhouse brought it to me the other day. Grateful, he was, that we had only given him a couple of days of confinement. He wanted to show his gratitude.'

The Colonel's face coloured, but then it returned to normal. He looked quizzically at his second-in-command. 'I believe, Allan, that you are an expert at making *sam su*. Would I be correct in that assumption?'

'Absolutely,' McTavish replied, and he gave the notion of a bow as he said it.

For a moment both meditated the delectable joys of *sam su*, but meditations have their limits and so— as though struck by an instantaneous idea—they both laid their swizzle sticks on the office desk, left the heavy matters of administration and discipline, and sought the privacy of the room they always shared. Now indeed it was 'Tony' and 'Allan' as they got down to the serious business of making *sam su* and when you come to think about it, what more interesting or rewarding occupation could you have in life?

Especially in a prisoner of war camp.

GUMDAD

All day long he wandered over the hills. Beautiful, wide-ranging hills they were. Of course, he did not range very far, for he was so small a boy. At the same time, he did not see himself as small. He was his own world within his own self. He found it better that way. In fact, that was how it was.

Sometimes he would pause and watch the auburn-haired woman. He liked her grey eyes, her slightly gaunt face; the way she puckered her eyes against the sun delighted him. When she looked, it was as though she was breaking through into some other world, seeing something he had not yet seen. He did not know whether she liked or disliked what she saw. Whatever it was, she would often gaze at it. Her hands poised above the washtub would remain suspended. All remained suspended in those moments— the high hills, the blue wash of the sky-bowl, the seed-tipped grasses, the leafy macadamias nearby, and the blue-hazed eucalypts in the distance.

He wondered what she saw, and one day crept up behind her as her hands hung, poised in silence. He looked where she looked. He saw no hole in the sky, no unseen world he imagined she knew. When he shook with impatience and disappointment, she seemed startled. Involuntarily her hands dropped into the washtub, selecting one of his garments. Even

then she was not shaken out of her mood.

'Wassit, Mummy?' he said eagerly, stabbing the blue sky with a Celtic finger.

She said nothing. She had so many thoughts these days, too many to cope with. Her fingers looked red in the tub. They seemed to float at angles from the fine knuckles.

'Wubin wanna see,' he said insistently.

She looked faintly puzzled, a little worried.

'See what?' she asked, her mood broken.

Suddenly he did not want to see. He knew it was a game he was not allowed to play. It was her game. She would always play it by herself. He lifted his hands and ran in a circular motion, as though he were flying.

'Wubin is a bird,' he said. 'Wubin can fly.'

She nodded. 'Rubin is a fine bird,' she said. 'He can fly well.'

Very soon they had forgotten one another. Rubin was down at the creek where the soft black tadpoles were vying for places in their shallow pools. He loved the effortless waving of their foolish tails. When he caught them, they shone and glistened, their black tails flapping on his pink palm.

His father, too, could see through sky. He knew that. Under his jutting eyebrows his eyes would look across the hills, into them, and beyond them. His look went through the rocky crags where the stunted gums clung, foaming out their eucalypt blossom and covering the high tree ferns. His father had the same look as his long-haired mother. To the boy Rubin it seemed they had a special power. They could see where he could not see.

He did not mind. He had so much to do with what he could see. Sometimes he saw the yabbies in the creek, way back under the overhanging logs, their antennae moving restlessly and their serious eyes, upon the thin sticks, jutting ahead of them from their plated bodies. Once he saw a huge yabby come towards him silently, rocking from side to side but not clumsily. His mouth had gone dry and he had been frozen with a delicious fear, but the huge thing had passed him by, as though its eye-bulbs were sightless.

Once he saw the slightest sliver of a snake. It was pale brown, soft-looking, like neutral plastic. His hands had wanted to caress it, but a whisper came to him, somewhere inside. He was not to do this—not this time, anyway.

Most of all he like the calf. It was a nuggety thing with thick legs and knobbed knees. It had shining red and white hair and a tail that hung and wobbled and flicked until he could not stop giggling. It would take his whole small fist into its soft, moist mouth, and while it sucked, the tail would flick from side to side and every so often give an ecstatic wobble. In its excitement the calf would butt him, and he would shriek with laughter and run. The calf would run after him.

He also loved the nights. He would watch his mother as the sun began to withdraw over the high hills. Long before they became dark, she would wander amongst the grass and the weeds, selecting leaves and stalks and sometimes a root or two. She would later rummage amongst the dried objects on the wooden shelves. His bearded father would poke

the sleepy fire, trying to make it angry, getting it to have little sparks of fury. Then there would be a spurt and a sputter and the fire would turn to good humour, flaring up merrily and making the woodpanelled room flicker with soft light.

He loved the evenings, leaning across the pear-shaped body of his mother. At nights she did not stare into the secret places of the blue with her steady gaze. Instead she would help him to eat, coaxing him with her special foods. Sometimes her soft hand would slip smoothly along his firm, plump arms, feeling him. Even he could feel the quiet pride she had in him. He liked that.

He liked the soft, gentle look that came to him from the beetled brow of his father. The ginger beard was long, matted and wide, but it ended in two separated, straggling tips.

It was then he could invoke his parents, teasing them, getting them to leave their food and chase him. Afterwards they would reward him. She would read to him from a book. He liked that, putting his square-ended fingers where he had pointed them several hundred times before.

His father read a lot, but never to him. His father told him stories straight from his heart. He had a rich, mellow voice. He had beautiful ideas which shaped pictures in Rubin's head. Sometimes during the day he would stop investigating things and he would summon up his pictures, which would come to him like serious and obedient slaves.

Sometimes the two of them, the mother and the father, would talk apart from him. He was in the room, but they hid their voices from him. They talked

in low, slurred words, slipping over the consonants and hiding the vowels so that he would not know.

In a way he did know. He slid along with the lazy vowels. He slurred into the dragging consonants. He so wanted to be with them that he dared not lag behind. Sometimes they made him anxious—so far away they were. Sometimes they were wonderfully close. Then his mother would make a grab at him, crushing him against her dress which smelled of grass and herbs. His bearded father would roll him over and over, or tickle him in the sensitive places until his giggles turned to shrieks and laughing tears.

That was why he liked the nights.

He liked the bandicoot which came, rustling among the old papers, or knocking over a tin, after which it would pause a moment before resuming investigations. Sometimes the great carpet snake that rested in the rafters would slide down, looking for the bandicoot, but that indignant creature would be gone in a flash, hopping madly across the concrete floor and its grass matting.

People came and went. They were very much like his father and mother. They were all gently spoken. All were quiet people. Sometimes they would look at his father's paintings and their eyes would shine. If they had money they would buy a painting, but occasionally his father would give them one without receiving any money, and they would slip away quietly, clutching the painting and looking thoughtful.

HE HAD one memory, but it was very faint. It was that of two older persons looking down. He remembered

their eyes had shone and they had touched him gently. He had been drowsy, unable to concentrate on them. After that they must have gone away.

It must have been these two who were coming back. He knew some event was about to take place, because of the way his parents talked. He could sense the feelings they had in their voices. He assessed it all calmly. Of course: a special event was to take place.

One day his father spoke to him. 'Grandad and Grandma are coining,' he said.

'Gumdad and Gumma,' Rubin said.

'No,' said his mother, 'not Gumdad and Gumma.'

'Gumdad,' he said, and they laughed.

'It doesn't master,' they said to him, but they were looking at each other, laughing.

When the two people came, he knew they were the old man and the old woman who had looked at him once, after he had awakened and before he had gone to sleep again.

He watched his father embrace them warmly, but awkwardly. His mother seemed eager and delighted. Perhaps this was what she was looking to see when she gazed unmoving at the blue sky. Anyway, she seemed happy.

He himself was delighted at the things they had brought him. Some of these things were strange. The sweets tasted different from the ones he had known. The toys were different too, as though they came from a new, shining world, not at all like his own. Partly they fascinated him, partly they repelled him with their strangeness, but he clung to them. The man and the woman seemed pleased. He liked the

deep blue eyes of the old woman and the grey eyes of the man.

His father said, 'Rubin, this is Grandma and Grandad. Say "Hullo!" to Grandma and Grandad.'

He said nothing to either of them. In his mind he was trying out their names. After a time, when they were eating, he suddenly said, 'Gumma. Gumdad.' They all laughed happily, and he knew the room was filled with joy. He knew his two words were magic words. They could set the four adult persons laughing at once, and he liked that. He liked the comfort and the security that flowed about when the four laughed. Sometimes, when they did not laugh, he sensed they were too quiet. Even when they talked a lot, they seemed a little uneasy.

One morning the two older people were not there. They had gone before he had awakened. He did not feel angry, only a little lonely. He refused his early morning treat of goat's milk and padded out into the dewy grass. The delicious sense of its touch was gone. Even his friend, the calf, seemed indifferent to him. It was pulling at tufts of wet paspalum and ignored him. In the early morning the creek seemed not to flow, and all the tadpoles had gone or were hidden.

He found tears on his face and one trickling into his mouth, salty and slightly bitter.

When he went back to the house he was very quiet. He drank his goat's milk, missing the older couple.

After some days he forgot. He played with the calf again and they were both rough with each other. He watched the soft pink fronds of the macadamia give way to feathery flowers and begin to form the first green-brown nuts.

That was when the two things had happened. The first happening was the coming of his little sister. It had been a time when his mother's eyes had shone, sometimes with a little pain, but mostly with pride and love. The women who had helped her were quiet and competent. His father was busy making the fire in the stove do its work of heating the water.

After a time he had heard a cry. It was the first cry of his little sister. When they showed her to him he had had mixed feelings. He wondered how she would play with him and the calf, and then go searching for the pill-eyed yabbies. She seemed so small. He, for his part, felt so big.

Not long afterwards the other thing had happened—the sudden, terrible happening.

His mother had put the sister into her bed on the floor and had gone out into the late afternoon. She had slipped with her bare feet into the soft cushion of kikuyu grass. She felt the sudden stab of pain and cried out. There was a quick flash of slithering brown, and the snake was gone.

Nothing in the grass had ever frightened him. Nothing anywhere had really been a cause for fear. Now he sensed a new thing in his world, and it brought a strange terror.

The men and women had come and had carried her quickly away on what looked like a light bed. Her eyes had held the same kind of terror that was in his heart. His father seemed very brave as he had picked Rubin up. In the car they travelled for many miles, all remaining silent. At the hospital they had been welcomed quietly by people in white clothes who took his mother away.

They had remained in silence, waiting for what was to happen.

So much happened. Sometimes his mother was still. Sometimes she was weeping quietly, the tears flowing. He remembered that after the snake had bitten her she had kept shuddering. He thought he would never forget that shuddering. He thought he would never forget the look in his father's eyes. He looked at the blue eyes that were always so clear, and now they were troubled. He felt the burden growing, weighing him down.

After a time they came back, his mother and the little sister. They used to lie together on the bed which was close to the floor. He would run out and talk to the calf, but it was growing big and would scamper away. The black tadpoles had grown and were nearing maturity. They wiggled away from him uneasily. They seemed so distant, so withdrawn. He did not like their remoteness. His eyes were always looking for a brown flicker of snake near the rioting pelargoniums. He could see the shimmering brown of it against the brilliant colour, and was uneasy. Not that he ever really saw it. It was just that the snake twitched in his memory, as did the shuddering of his mother.

One day he heard his father and mother murmuring together. His father went off to find timber, a saw, a hammer and some nails. He was making alterations to the house. The boy followed him wherever he went. He picked up the sawn blocks when they fell away from the timber. He built a little house of them, but the heavy cloud in his mind would not go away. The troubled look was gone from his father's eyes,

but his father was silent in himself. His mother kept picking up things from the floor and the furniture, stacking them away in the shelves. She made some quick curtains to cover the shelves. The activity began to awaken vibrations within him.

Then they told him that Gumdad and Gumma were coming. Because he could scarcely remember, he did not know what to think. The two who were coming were really hidden behind his cloud of worry. The snake had killed his world of happiness. It had stultified his natural serenity. It had spelled out a dark truth that much was not to be trusted any more. Indeed, little was to be trusted. He thought of the self-centred calf, and the remote tadpoles, and what was hidden by the deceptive pelargoniums.

Then they came. The distant sound of the motor vehicle alerted him to nothing. Motor vehicles came and went, although they were not greatly loved in this place. They brought quiet, thoughtful people and then took them away again. It was all in a day's living. The calf and the tadpole were more permanent. Even the pelargoniums were always there, whatever they may have covered.

He saw the old man and the grey-haired woman making their way up the slope, digging their toes into the thick kikuyu, carrying their armful of bundles. Something stirred in his memory, and a slight warmth began to spread through, a tiny, delicious tinge of delight. It was so delicate, so tenuous, but it was there. So were the pelargoniums and the sliding, slithering brown beneath them. But still, he liked the way these two were moving towards him.

At the gate, near the small house, his parents were

waiting. They were like two shy persons, reaching out to the older couple but not going to them. Then they did go. In fact they ran. Suddenly the boy saw his mother as a young woman, as a girl in fact. He saw her long auburn tresses go floating in the wind, flying up behind her. Her arms rose and fell as she ran, and she kept skipping through the long green grass, as though it had never held even one serpent. The father ran in an unaccustomed heavy jog, his hands working up and down as he ran.

Then the small boy began to run. He ran away from everything. He was running to a security he had never known. He was running towards a new thing, something he had scarcely understood, but now he was understanding.

Before he reached there, he saw the kindly grey eyes of the one, and the deep blue of the other. His mother had embraced and wept and wept, and his father had embraced in the only way he knew, a gruff and awkward way, but the boy knew he was pleased. The parcels they held kept tumbling down onto the grass. His father was picking them up, stacking them in his arms.

Suddenly he saw the laughter in the eyes, the grey eyes and the blue eyes, and it came tumbling out, flowing towards him, mounting him, and then falling all over his body, like warm cascades of joy. He put out his stubby arms and was caught up, a strong hug crushing out the fears, dispelling the clouds, and causing a sudden blaze of warm sunshine. He let himself go into it, and found he was sobbing. Something was pouring out of him to be lost in the thick kikuyu, and never to be seen again.

Before he knew it, it had all happened. Not only the grey and blue eyes of the older ones, but the eyes of his excited mother and of his nodding father, and the four of them were about him, their arms about each other, and they were all laughing, a rich, honeyed kind of laughter, flowing and moving smoothly and dripping down.

He felt the words in him moving, sluggishly at first, and then more rapidly. He could feel them coming to the surface from some past world of knowing and understanding. Finally they broke from him like a half-smothered scream. They came from him in accents of sheer delight, understanding, recognition.

'Gumma!' he cried to the grey-haired woman, and he looked into her eyes. Then he turned to the grey-haired man. 'Gumdad!' he said, and then, as though he wanted to cry it for ever and ever, he cried, time and again:

'Gumdad. Oh, Gumdad. Gumdad! Gumdad!
Gumdad!'

THE DELIGHTFUL DEFOLIANT

Mr Burtenskip grew excellent vegetables. 'Excellent' is a mild word. 'Superb' would be better, and yet it would not cover the quality of those vegetables. Most people have heard of 'Findhorn', that community in Scotland which grows vegetables beyond comparison. They are large, even to the point of being frightening. Who, for example, wishes a cabbage to tower over him, or a cauliflower suddenly to loom up ahead of him in the Scottish mist? Who wishes to be confronted by the terrifying spectacle of climbing beans actually *climbing*? I mean, climbing all over the poor visitor, so rapidly is the Findhorn product reported to grow.

No, Mr Burtenskip's vegetables were not at all Findhornian. He would have rejected the very idea of having *overgrown* vegetables. All he sought to do was to grow good vegetables, and doubtless, while they were larger than other vegetables one normally sees, for example, in the supermarket, yet they were not preternaturally swollen or enlarged. They were easily recognisable as true vegetables. That was what made them at one and the same time attractive and threatening. Now in these two words lies the whole thrust of my story. I mean, the words 'attractive' and 'threatening'.

Without doubt, Mr Burtenskip was renowned for his vegetables; or, one might say, Mrs Burtenskip was renowned for her husband Harry's vegetables. On the whole subject of vegetables Mr Burtenskip could be seen to be silent, even to the point of being taciturn. No matter: Mrs Burtenskip (Thalia, I mean) lived in much of the glory of the achievements of her husband. That she was proud of Harry's vegetables was most evident. You could even say she rose to glory on the produce that her husband generated.

When I tell you about that produce, you will not at all be surprised. For those who did not know what lay behind the scene, Mr Burtenskip's vegetables were indeed attractive. The carrots, of course, were red, orange-red to be precise. They were long, thick, juicy and, if tried, crunchy. His parsnips were creamy-white and cool. Long and smooth they were, reaching down, as they had, through the compost-layered earth. Turnips were of various varieties—depending on the kind of soup you wished to make from them— but again fresh, juicy, and tasty. There were other root vegetables such as kohlrabi, red beet, and the like. The vegetables which grew above the ground were no less to be admired, each in its due season. The varieties of tomatoes were many. You had the small pinball types, the large egg-fruit types, and from small rosy-round to large thick-fleshed giants. These smooth products had so been the envy of his first neighbour, Algie Brackenhall, that after trying to grow a rival product Mr Brackenhall had given up gardening altogether. But more of that matter later.

To resume our saga of the vegetables. It was the *variety* of vegies which had made Harry B. so famous. Not only did he grow the good and honest Aussie type of vegie; he grew exotic types also. Of course, the seed was imported, and you know what it is like to get imported seed through quarantine. I tell you, Harry B. used every expedient to increase the variety of his produce. For example, have you ever heard of bok choy? Would you know a Chinese vegetable if you saw it? What would you know of Chinese spinach, Chinese celery, Chinese cabbage? Well, it is possible you have heard of one of these latterly, but Mr Burtenskip knew all about them years ago.

The strange thing is that he would produce his exotics in indifferent silence. I mean, if you were to admire these special varieties, if you were to say, 'Harry, that's a fascinating plans,' then he would scarcely reply, or at the most he would give a noncommittal grunt. That was what intrigued me for years. I could not but genuinely admire the amazing variety, from good old honest English vegies down to the exotics from California, China, and other unnamed countries.

Perhaps it is best that I do not pursue this line. I mean, if I keep telling you of the type of produce, the size and quality and variety of the same, it may make your mouth water, but it might also bring a slow rage to your vegetable-growing instincts. It would, of course, be the rage of frustration. From early times man has had an intuitive conviction that the soil is his, its seeds are his, and the capacity to grow produce, admire and eat it is his also.

This brings me back to my point, namely, the two

words 'attractive' and 'threatening'. Let us treat these words in their natural order. You will understand, of course, why Harry's vegies were attractive. It is how they were, by nature. Anyone surely would wish to admire them, to hold them, feel them, and then cook and eat them. And this is what many did. For years the Burtenskips ladled out their vegetables. How, anyway, could a married couple in middle age possibly eat half an acre of vegetables, unaided? It would be impossible. So then, the Burtenskips gave generously of their produce. Moreover, it was eagerly received. The produce was certainly admired. As I said, quite a number of people found them attractive.

Now for the threatening side of the affair. First, those who received gifts of vegetables were of two kinds, namely, the guileless and the suspicious. The guileless received these gifts, year in, year out, and never gave the matter a thought. They were simply happy to receive them, as indeed the Burtenskips seemed happy to give them. As a result, many of the recipients showed their gratitude in small ways. One of them was likely to turn up with a load of fowl or horse manure, or even bring a couple of bags of compost. When they did this, there was a momentary glint in Harry's eyes. He would nod briefly, but say nothing, and the guileless would depart, happy to have had a little part in Harry's success.

The second, the suspicious, were of a different ilk. They would take the gifts silently, hold them, stare at them, and then nod again to Harry and give a short word of thanks. It meant nothing to Harry either way. He seemed impervious to spontaneous and

forced things alike. He just went on his vegetable way, so to speak. The suspicious, however, knew that in human affairs the giving and receiving of gifts is a very serious affair. One does not wish to give without receiving, hence one must not receive without the expectation of returning something. What puzzled the suspicious ones was that, as far as they could see, Harry had no motive in giving, other than to be rid of his surplus. Some of the suspicious ones even came to accept the fact that Harry was an unusual and unmotivated man in the matter of vegetable-giving.

It was his wife, Thalia, who worried many of them. As we said clearly, she really rode to glory on Harry's vegetables. She basked in the sunshine of his fine accomplishments, though Harry, no doubt, did not even see them as accomplishments. It was evident to the suspicious that she had much invested in the size and quality of Burtenskip lettuce and winter chicory. They never missed the gleam in her eyes, even though the eye of Harry was quiet and unwinking.

There was, in addition, a further and more serious threat, and of this I wish to speak. Any fool would know that wherever a man has any kind of demonstrable success that he threatens the very foundations of the universal inferiority complex. Each man has his own area of inferiority, and each woman also. From the cradle to the grave we are trying to prove ourselves, and the ones who succeed where we do not are not only the objects of wistful envy, but often of virulent hatred. Such was the case with Algie Brackenhall, Harry B's first neighbour. Harry B. had been established many years in vegetable-growing before Algie and his wife Annie moved in on the vir-

gin soil next to the Burtenskips. They saw their neighbour's vegetable-growing with delight, whooped with joy, and proceeded to carve out a garden for themselves.

Harry B. showed great interest. He was a selfless man in this matter, and advised young Algie how to handle the soil. He even lent his rotary hoe to his neighbour, a thing he had not done before. He advised in regard to filth of the soil, the removal of stones, the sweetening of the acidic soil, and the leaving of it acidic in certain areas for crops which liked an acidic content. Here they limed, there they did not. Here they applied heavy dressings of animal manures, there they were skimpy with it. All the genius of Harry B. was leased out so that young Brackenhall might succeed.

Now in one sense he did succeed, and, but for Thalia and Annie, would have succeeded *just as far as he had wished to succeed*. To tell the truth, he grew fine vegetables. They were all and more than the Brackenhalls could consume, and that should have been that. Sadly enough, that was not that! Thalia had come on to the scene. She had the ability to be casual in voice, but cutting in tone. She was mistress of the innuendo, so that it came to be understood that Thalia thought Algie's vegetables inferior to those of her husband.

You would say, 'Whatever would it matter, anyway?' and you would be one hundred percent correct. Unfortunately Annie did not see it that way, for she was the victim of a large sense of inferiority, and also of hurt pride. I suppose the two go together, but in this case they provided the fuel for a full fury. The

history from that point on is a sad one, and we will not dwell much on it. Suffice to say that, as the days went by, Algie was caught up in a rivalry which had in it all the elements of frustration, bitterness, despair and great rage. Had Annie left him alone, the two men could easily have made it. Annie, however, had to live with the gentle but unmistakable innuendoes of her female neighbour. The message came through, time and again, 'Algie is doing wonderfully, comparatively speaking, but then, who could ever grow vegetables like Harry?' True indeed; who could ever do just that?

You will have guessed the outcome. The day came when Algie and Annie disappeared from the local scene. In fact, they went fully suburban. They moved down from the gracious and spacious hill country into a crowded suburb with the regular suburban cubicles of houses, and there they began to live afresh, gardenless but without rivalry. In her own quiet but insistent way, Thalia had won. What, after all, was a young Annie against such a mature and experienced Thalia?

THERE were others who were threatened, but we need not linger on their stories. They were, for example, the other growers of prize vegetables, who competed in the annual Shows. There are many of them in the Hills, and of course the Main Show, which is held in the city at the Showgrounds. You can guess what I am about to say: namely, that Harry B. took off most of the prizes. The man seemed to live simply to produce the ideal type of this or that vegetable, and the judges could not but wax enthusiastic at the rich and

beautiful lines of his produce. Time and again they pinned the ribbons gold or blue or red. There was scarcely a Burtenskip vegetable that ever went away ribbonless from a Show.

So Showgrowers were not only threatened, but also helpless. It was not that Harry was mean with his seed or parsimonious with his advice. Strangely enough for a man taciturn by nature, he seemed almost pathetically eager in his desire to help. He would hand out seed, give advice about times for sowing, the hope for seasonal harvests, and also share his insights into compost-making, manure applications, and the like. Nevertheless, in spite of all his advice to other Showgrowers, Harry's success seemed to increase.

You can imagine how Thalia blossomed. She was generous to a T. She distributed vegetables right and left. She was always glad to show folk the garden—nothing was ever a trouble to her. Sure, she basked somewhat in it all, but was gracious, and even her pride always appeared to be a gentle thing. Yet it must be admitted that when the National Women's Journal came to interview her to write an article and to take photographs, she was not at all averse to giving them every assistance. When the folk from the TV channel came, she volunteered Harry's assistance also, although that aspect failed to work out satisfactorily. It was not simply that Harry was modest. He was plain unco-operative. It finished up, then, that most of the TV interview was talking with Thalia, and all the time the cameras worked in telling and supportive sweeps across Harry's magnificent vegetables.

And there my story might have ended. The play would have gone on of course—vegetables grown regularly, Harry busy with his seeds, seedlings, compost, applied manures, weeding, fighting insects and disease and all that goes with that game—but eventually the day would have come when, because of sheer age, Harry could do no more. Thalia too would have had to accept the fact, and the Burtenskips could have become like any other aged couple: frail but satisfied.

Well, what changed this prospect was the coming of the Thurstons. Two years after the Brackenhalls had left, the Thurstons came. They too, like the Burtenskips, were a middle-aged couple with married children and some grandchildren. Like the Burtenskips, they also were retired, with tons of time on their hands and an acreage of ground which was just waiting for some hobby or vocation to be fulfilled.

The last thing Arthur Thurston wanted to do was to grow vegetables. Harry B., for his part, was neutral. On his side he neither encouraged nor discouraged. Kathy T. was a well-built woman, with a strong character and an air of business. It was natural that she would encourage Arthur to put in a few vegetables. Arthur half-heartedly hired a rotary hoe, and ploughed up the weed-grown gardens of his predecessor. His manuring and seeding were desultory. In all this, Harry remained silent, neutral and uncommunicative. When Arthur displayed a successful vegetable or two, Harry would nod absently and then become lost in his own thoughts. Arthur was quite happy to accept this.

Thalia, for her part, seemed indifferent to the

simple gardening of her neighbours. She seemed, even, not to notice it. Kathy was slightly miffed, but not much put out. So the neighbours lived satisfactorily together. Arthur T. bought some beehives, and these occupied some of his attention. At the same time he quietly improved his modes of growing vegetables. Kathy would always be encouraging him, and that was that.

ARTHUR grew a cabbage which Harry was happy to say was a prize cabbage. What matter if all the rest of the cabbages in the same garden were ordinary? This was a prodigy, so to speak, and Arthur was deeply satisfied. A gleam came into his eye. He asked Harry if it might make Show class. Harry agreed it easily could.

'Then should I show it?' asked Arthur Thurston.

Harry was non-committal. 'That's just up to you,' he suggested.

Kathy for some reason was indignant. 'He might have encouraged you,' she said huffily. Arthur murmured that Harry hadn't discouraged him.

The whole thing set Kathy to thinking about it, the outcome of which was that Arthur displayed his cabbage at the Local Show and won first prize, if you please! People were amazed. So was Thalia, who scarcely knew how to cope with the surprise. However, she finally managed, and sincerely congratulated Arthur upon his success.

From that point onwards everything deteriorated. You might say from that point on, the action commenced. The two ideas are mutually inclusive.

Thurston went from success to success. He grew other vegetables which succeeded. As the compost was applied, the soil tilled, the seedlings nurtured and the weather understood, Arthur had fewer and fewer failures and more and more successes! We have to say in all honesty that such successes were mild in comparison to Harry's prizes, but then, they were a great advance on nothing.

A curious ambivalence appeared in Harry B. On the one hand he seemed quite prepared to give any advice Arthur asked of him; on the other, he was wholly reluctant to volunteer any advice or help, something he had always been happy to do with Algie and Annie. Arthur eagerly snapped up all he could learn. He became the *habitué* of garden centres, and an avid reader of garden guides. He joined the Agricultural and Horticultural Society. He haunted the Agricultural Department, eating up every pamphlet they had produced in the area of vegetables. He attended seminars, even to the point of lecturing on certain aspects of growing vegetables. In short, he was now a victim of the Great Passion—that of producing vegetables not for the mere eating of them, but for the full showing of them.

Behind the scenes Kathy worked hard. Something seemed to egg her on, and so unworthy was it that we will not even mention it. Arthur was spurred on because of this. It was not unnoticed by Thalia, who had her own ways and means of doing things. Back and forth the battle raged, but never an impolite word, never a harsh statement. The Burtenskips and the Thurstons regularly had afternoon tea together, and chatted generally about things. There was

mutual congratulation at successes and an occasional commiseration where there had been a failure. Beyond all this, nothing.

I will forbear describing to you the painful deterioration. Whilst Harry plugged on in his level, steady way, Arthur did not. He spent hours at night planning better growth, more shapely show products, and wondering how he could achieve the successes which would dim those of his patient neighbour. In all of this, Kathy worked with no less dedication, no less vigour.

It was Harry who first noted the aberrations. He knew, for example, that Arthur had missed his rotation cycle. Inadvertently he had planted a vegetable that thrived on acidic soil in a garden bed which had been richly sweetened. He noted that Arthur had failed to use a necessary insecticide. Harry rarely had to resort to insecticides, because he had worked through the basic principles of organic gardening, but then he was no rigorist in this area. He was not averse to using an artificial aid here and there. He was totally indifferent to legalism. So he worried a little for his neighbour.

It was Kathy who realised that something had happened to her Arthur. The doctor she took him to said his blood pressure had increased, and he was a little worried for his patient. Sometimes Kathy would find him muttering, and with it a bit of fist-clenching went on. Irritability was normally foreign to him, but he had visitations of some of that also. Finally he would take to going out at midnight, torch in hand, looking for snails and slugs, but more often flashing the torch across into the Burtenskip garden

and staring at the large vegies which looked back at him with healthy gaze. At these times he was subject to great inner fury. He would remember the threat of high blood pressure and groan.

Then the plot came to him. It came to him one night when he was lying awake, staring through the gloom at the flat white ceiling. At first he cast it away as unworthy, but it gripped him firmly, and finally he succumbed to its seductive passion. He literally lived in it, dreaming about it day and night, and an unhealthy smile began to fix itself upon his face, so much so that Kathy was worried.

One day she said, 'Arthur, is there anything wrong, dear?'

'Wrong?' he said, staring blankly. 'No, there is nothing wrong at all.' He gave his strange grin, and patted her hand. 'Just you relax,' he said. He repeated his reassuring pat. 'Everything's going to be fine,' he muttered.

She was not convinced, and she watched him closely. Yet she could discover nothing, and after a time, with a sigh, she decided (though uneasily) that all was well.

It wasn't all that well in the vegetable garden. Kathy knew there were few prizes, many bugs, and no less disease. Arthur seemed to have lost his grip on the weed growth, and he seemed listless about trying out new and rival varieties of vegies. It wasn't that he failed to work hard, but that his heart did not seem to be in it as before. There was no little anger in Kathy's heart, but then, as we have hinted, Kathy's motives were not of the highest order.

Finally it happened! It happened the weekend the

Burtenskips went on their annual visit to their married children. These relatives were on the land, of course, but at a fair distance from the Hills. So the Burtenskips, by tradition, would spend the Friday to Monday on their visiting and return Monday night, late. Tuesday would always see Harry out at dawn, catching up with the watering, pruning the tomatoes, and maybe doing a little weeding.

It was at this time that it happened. Arthur, with all his knowledge of what was required, was able to ensure it happened. He went to work with fiendish glee and with ruthless efficiency. He left nothing undone that ought to have been done, but he certainly did what ought never to have been done. The work completed, he withdrew with savage satisfaction and awaited the result.

Rather than subject you to a detailed description of the result, let us say that Arthur succeeded wholly in his aim. This he saw as the few days passed, and he awaited the outcome with a dreadful and gloating delight.

He hid himself in the high sweet corn plants. The rows were narrow and he stood in one of them, peering through the leaves. A small breeze moved amongst the tassels and lightly showered him with pollen, but he was indifferent to it. He was awaiting his great moment of awful triumph.

As he watched, he saw Harry Burtenskip emerge from his house—bush shirt, moleskins, Wellington boots, and his old hat upon his head. It was Harry all right, and Arthur shook with unholy glee. Harry B. saw what had happened long before he reached the garden. He actually quickened his step, and then,

there he was, in the midst of the carnage and wreckage, and the whole blasted leafage and rootage of his world-successful garden.

Arthur watched intently,

his keen gaze on his neighbour. He sensed the growing delight that hatred and vengeance were encouraging within him. He waited for the thrill of it to spill across his whole person, but nothing came. As he watched, he could scarcely believe what he was seeing and hearing.

Something had happened to his neighbour. The old Burtenskip was gone, and a new one had replaced him. The man Thurston had known had been a taciturn, inverted person, rarely expressing himself. In some ways compliant, he had also been unchangeable and obstinate. He had communicated nothing. He had been the master of the neutral position. Now his taciturnity, neutrality and invertedness had vanished—gone in a quick, fascinating moment.

Thurston could not believe his eyes. Burtenskip was literally capering around his ruined garden. The defoliating agent had done its work in a final way. Blackened, shrivelled vegetables lay like distorted and silent corpses across the half-acre. Row after row of vegetable death met the gaze of the prize winner, but he was capering like a happy fool, a delighted idiot, shouting with almost maniacal joy. Thurston knew him to be no religious person, but here he was, shouting and crying, 'Hallelujah! Hallelujah!' To Thurston's puzzlement, he was throwing up his arms to the heavens and saying, 'It has happened! It has happened! At last it has happened!'

'Perhaps,' thought Thurston with a pang of fear, 'he has gone mad. The defeat and sorrow have been

too much for trim.' Guilty feelings, long submerged, now began to come to the surface. He felt a bit sick within himself. Nevertheless he watched, still gripped to some degree by anger and hatred.

And still his middle-aged neighbour capered on. Perhaps 'danced' would be a better word: head down, running along; head up, arms thrown heavenwards, uttering great cries of praise. Hops, skips, leaps, and delighted laughter.

It was too much for Arthur Thurston. He broke his way through the sweet corn, brushing it aside. He trampled over a bed of young tomatoes, and trod amidst the cucumber patch. He reached the fence, panting a trifle.

'Burtenskip,' he cried out, 'are you all right?'

'All right?' cried Burtenskip. 'Of course I'm all right.' He thumped a fist into an open palm. 'You bet I'm all right, Arthur Thurston! I'm a free man, that's what I am!'

'Free?' asked his neighbour foolishly. 'Free?'

'You bet,' said Harry, almost waggishly. 'I've waited years for this.'

'You've waited for years?' said Arthur, staring.

'Who wouldn't?' chuckled Harry. 'Who wouldn't?' He stared back at Arthur. 'Did you do this?' he asked.

Arthur became careful, cautious. He knew about lawsuits and all that sort of thing. 'Why do you ask?' he queried in a guarded voice.

'I want to thank the man who did it,' said Harry. 'Thought no one would ever do it.'

He looked cautiously towards the house. 'Just don't let her find out who it was, that's all,' he said confidentially. He sighed with deep joy. 'Ah, I thought

it would never happen.' He smiled at Thurston. 'I hope it's a good defoliant.' He looked a trifle anxiously at Arthur. 'It is a good defoliant, isn't it?' he asked.

Thurston decided to come clean, to be committed to his crime. 'Very good,' he said, solemnly. In fact he waxed suddenly enthusiastic. 'No defoliant like it,' he said. 'It also poisons the ground for years. For five years you can't even use it.'

'wonderful,' whispered Harry. 'Better than I could have dreamed of.'

A sudden anger welled in Thurston at the sight of the beautifully contented man. No man should have such happiness. He came in, cruelly: 'I doubt whether you could grow things there ever again.'

Deeper contentment and richer happiness. Thurston's eyes grew round with wonder. The curiosity overcame his other feelings. 'Tell me,' he said, 'why are you so glad? Why aren't you angry with me?'

'Glad?' asked Harry. 'Not angry?' he echoed. 'Why, don't you realise I'm free for the rest of my life?' Then, as Arthur listened with unbelief, Harry launched into his explanation.

'No more ploughing or tilling,' he said. 'No having to make composts, sow seeds, nurture seedlings, mix manures. No more having to be in competition with a world of vegetable growers to beat them in Shows.'

Arthur interrupted him. 'Didn't you want to do that?' he asked, incredulous.

'Want to do that?' asked Harry. 'You must be joking!' he said. 'I hated it. Hated Thalia for her horrible pride and her deadly ambition.' He paused. 'She was like a leech, that one,' he said strongly. 'Day and night she was at me. If anyone won a prize and we lost, I

would never hear the end of it. The hell I wanted to win a prize! No way, my friend. I hated the whole rotten thing.'

When Thurston seemed uncomprehending, he went on. 'Man, how I hated those great overgrown things! Large cabbages disgusted me. Swollen caulies made me feel sick. Every prize carrot stuck in my throat and every tall stalk of spinach was an insult to my intelligence. Still she was on my back. "Better, better still!" was what she seemed to be saying. How I hated it all! His voice dropped to a whisper. 'You do that kind of thing, but you don't really live.' He seemed appalled at this self-revelation. 'You just don't live,' he reiterated.

Thurston was numb with the understanding that was coming through to him. 'What did you want to do, thee?' he asked.

Harry looked at him solemnly. 'First, I never wanted to grow one vegetable,' he said. 'I did that long ago, at the beginning, just to give us vegies. It was like doing anything else, nothing terribly wrong, nothing terribly right.' He paused. 'Until, of course, we won that first prize.' He paused again, meditating. 'Then it grew. Thalia had something over other people.' He stopped and the wistfulness came to his eyes.

'I wanted to fish,' he said. 'To take a book and fish. That's all I wanted of life. I had always dreamed of doing that, after retirement.'

Thurston was amazed. 'Not even bowls?' he said.

Harry shook his head. 'Can't stand bowls,' he said.

A little awe crept into Arthur, and a little envy also. 'I love fishing, too,' he said wistfully. He jerked his

hands towards the house. 'She hates fishing,' he said. Harry stood, thinking. Then he spoke. 'Maybe there's a way out of all this.' He jerked his thumb towards Arthur's garden. 'Maybe you can grow enough vegies for us bosh,' he suggested.

Arthur spat. 'I hate the things!' he said violently. 'Never grow another vegie,' he said angrily.

'Then,' said Harry, 'maybe Thalia and Kathy could start a joint venture.' He looked politely blank. 'It'd have to be in your garden, Arthur,' he said. He grinned. 'We could have a joint fishing venture.' He went into a peal of laughter that was close to maniacal. 'They could produce the vegies, and we could produce the fish!' He looked slyly at Arthur. 'You're a one, aren't you?' he asked.

He came across to his neighbour, and held out his hand. 'Thank you, Arthur,' he said. 'Let's shake on it.'

Humbly Thurston complied. 'Good of you, Harry,' he mumbled.

Harry grinned, and then looked towards the house. There was no apprehension in his voice as he spoke. 'I guess I'd better go and tell the old girl,' he said.

He turned and walked towards the house. Arthur had the distinct impression that Harry looked much younger. It seemed that there was a lightness about his step, or, you might say, an unaccustomed buoyancy in his walk, an uncharacteristic carefreeness. It was, of course, merely an impression. Arthur also had the feeling that Harry was about to have a quite enjoyable time.

Arthur turned thoughtfully, walking towards his own house. He had a few things to tell Kathy too, things he had wanted to tell her for years.

He wondered a little to himself. He was wondering how Thalia would take it from Harry, and Kathy from him, and suddenly there came to him the agreeable thought that perhaps both of them might take it very well. He couldn't be sure, of course, but he felt he could trust his intuition, at least for this once.

He rather savoured the moment, as he went to see Kathy, and he kept wondering why he should, in fact, savour it so much.

BOYS, LETTERBOXES, AND BASKET-BOMBS

Do I remember Roddie Sparks? Man, was he ever a madcap! He was alert, bright, canary-like in the eyes and legs; thin as a wisp, but full of packed energy. He was always thinking up things, silly pranks and that sort of happening. He made events eventuate. As for me, I was heavy, awkward, with great knobbly knees, big hands and feet, hair that was never tidy, and my clothes used to look as though they were never intended to fit me anyway. Roddie? Why, he was, as I have said, neat as a canary. Everyone accepted Roddie, and, as far as I can remember, there was only ever one exception to that rule.

That exception had to do with Guy Fawkes' Day. Today they have laws about crackers because they are so dangerous. I remember the quaint old epitaph I once read:

‘HERE LIE I,
TIMOTHY FEY,
KILLED BY A
SKYROCKET
IN MY EYE SOCKET.

I could always see that eye peering down at the skyrocket as the hand belonging to the eye lit it—a bit

macabre, but then that is how it sometimes was with Guy Fawkes' crackers.

Our days of childhood were the days of the basket-bomb. Strangely enough, no pacifist had ever objected to this little bomb, and no terrorist had ever developed its potential to high capacity. Come to think of it, both pacifists and terrorists were a rare commodity in those times. Perhaps, in the order of things, one is absent in the presence of the other, and vice versa. I do not rightly know.

The basket-bomb was brilliantly designed for sudden and immediate damage to the desks of schoolteachers. It worked by a fuse, and you could actually buy fuses which could be fitted so that the time of the explosion could be set within a second or two. The beauty of this bomb was that whilst it could dispose of a desk in a satisfactory manner, the teacher himself would not be damaged. The only damage I have ever seen was a singed eyebrow or two, and beyond that, nothing!

As I remember, the cost of the bombs was comparatively little. Anyway, little more than, say, a skyrocket. The largest, of course, were more costly, but not beyond the average boy's purse, which, in those days, was a very limited affair. My purse seemed perpetually empty, and would have remained in that state but for Roddie Sparks. He really knew how to get money for purses.

One thing I will say for Roddie was that he was never underhand. The way we made money was fair and above board. We collected bottles: (i) soft-drink bottles (they fetched the best prices), and (ii) beer bottles (they had disadvantages). Our parents were

all teetotallers—or made out they were—so they would not let us stack them in the backyards of our swank suburb. Also the 'Bottle-O!' was a predatory creature. If you gathered or collected one hundred bottles, he would give you no more for them than if you collected fifty, so you would have to make various piles and get kids to sub for you in the sales. That meant a bit of commission, so we had the most heart for soft-drink bottles.

Another way of making money was by collecting cow manure, horse manure, and chook manure. This was done in bags or in barrows. I won't bore you with the comparative prices. My normal pocket money consisted of threepence up to the age of 8, sixpence to the age of 12, and ninepence from then on. It certainly needed to be supplemented.

To tell the truth, we had not put ourselves out to earn much. When we did try to do so, it was only to buy the basket-bombs, because the Terrific Idea that Roddie Sparks had thought up, although not entirely new, was a Better Idea than others had worked out. For us it was the Year of the Fuse. The long timefuses had only recently been invented or, if previously invented, had not, until that year, reached the Land of Oz. The time-fuse allowed our Idea to work to perfection.

The Idea was this. Those who blew up home letterboxes were generally caught because one had to light the bomb and get rid of it within a few seconds, or lose the hand that held it. This meant that the sound of an exploding bomb, especially around Guy Fawkes' Day, would bring householders running to the street. The pranksters would be grabbed quickly,

because the householders more or less agreed to mutual security, a sort of enlightened self-interest. The cost of new letterboxes was, of course, quite considerable. So the idea of the time-fuse was one of genius. We were all praise and gratitude for it.

Roddie and I had hatched up a further protective idea. The street our eyes were on had houses only along one side. The other side was beautiful virgin bush. Not low, patchy scrub, but tall and concealing bush. Every eucalypt was a tall giant, and all the undergrowth was thick. High tree ferns were profuse, clematis hung in deep green and creamy clouds. In some places large protective clumps of blackberries grew, and we knew the secret paths through these. Finally the long, thick sword grass was cover enough if you sidled into it, insinuating yourself along it until no one could believe it covered two bomb-blasting urchins. We knew that we could not fail.

The excitement ran high in us both. We knew just the time to do it: lunchtime. We would play cricket until then, and bring our own lunches and hide them in a secret treasure-hole in the bush. We would also hide our cricket bats. Two large basket-bombs, complete with trailing time-fuses, would be the only things we would carry, . Two letterboxes a day was all we wanted, and our finances kept us simply to that. On the first day we would attempt two of the smallest letterboxes. We would examine the results at an appropriate moment, and then tackle the larger targets the next day. We had our own eye on a Special Target; but then, more of that anon.

The first day was easy. It was, as they say, like

falling off a log. It was the proverbial hot knife cutting through butter. It was, to use the cliché, a cinch. We lit the fuses, slipped them into the letterboxes, penetrated the bush and the forest of bladed sword grass. We waited, listening to the accompaniment of thudding hearts, and at the appropriate and set time we heard the explosions. We admitted they were somewhat frightening, but then they were also sweet music. We were *blooded*, so to speak. These were our first (and last, alas!) crimes as we approached full adolescence. We had blown up two letterboxes.

We lay for some time, not daring to move. We could hear faint cries. We could hear the thump of running above the thud of our heartbeats. Then the crying and the running died away, and all we heard were the usual rich sounds of the bush. We ate our lunches, tasting sweet victory with each sandwich, and easily covering our guilt with boyish boasting.

To tell the truth, I didn't much like the idea of using the next two basket-bombs. I was more than a trifle terrified by their size. There was something sinister about them, what with their solid ball-like appearance, their deadly look in their can wrappings, and their formidable size as though they had outgrown the delightful harmlessness of children's crackers and were bidding fair to be real and deadly weapons of warfare. The fancy passed, but not without a shiver.

IT WAS not that we had become careless. We had hidden our lunches. We had also hidden our cricket gear. We had strolled carelessly down the road before we

lit the fuses and planted the bombs. Indeed, we had quietly eyed the Special Target, the home of the famous Rex Hambridge, the Rhodes scholar. Actually, it was not his home but his father's. Nevertheless, it was where he lived.

Rex Hambridge was about the most famous man we knew. He was famous for his looks, his natural mien, his superb calmness, his thoroughbred indifference, his ability to impress—all without the slightest affectation. He was brilliant in science—so they said. He was exceptional as a sportsman. He was in fact a test cricketer, and this though still at Oxford. There was talk of him becoming famous in politics, and some said that one day he was destined for special things, like becoming the very Prime Minister of our Land of Oz. That, as you know, was no small thing.

Those of us who were youths were not in the habit of introspecting. We were fairly extroverted, in fact. We were too busy doing things to examine our motives, but I know now, even without introspection, that we were really bombing Rex Hambridge himself. He was just too good to be true. We had a thing about fine, thoroughbred, socially successful young men. We thought they could not possibly be genuine. They were almost everything a youth of Oz was supposed not to be. Where we were casual, they were earnest. Where we hung loose to our natural gifts self-consciously, they equally self-consciously—displayed theirs, insisting upon their value. This is how it all seemed to us; so underneath we were out for the Rex Hambridges, rot their souls!

That was why we took delight in buying the

largest, the most sinister fuse we could buy. We also thought that if the first bomb we detonated were to go off well before the other, then the second would bring immense surprise. I remember we placed the first bomb into the letterbox of the Wrights, a quite harmless retired couple whose children were married. Then we came to the monster of a letterbox, the large and ornate piece of the Hambridge *maison*. We had to slip a hand around the back, loosen the latch, slip in the immense firework, and allowing only for the fuse to trail to the ground. Then we fastened the latch to enclose the explosion and its impact, and we stooped to light the fuse.

The conditions were ideal. Not a soul was in the street. We looked up and down before we lit the fuse. Then we ran.

We ran further than we needed. We ran faster than the event required. We hid deeper than was necessary; not so deeply, however, that we did not hear the first bomb explode. It was with startling loudness, so much so that we looked at each other with questioning eyes and arched eyebrows. Then we waited for the second impact.

We waited, and we waited, and we waited. We heard no cries, no sounds of running feet, and this probably because we were so far away. At last the explosion came. There was no doubting its force nor questioning its impact. It was loud, heavy, and clear. Something of fear tinged our tense smiles. We waited, expecting to hear shouting and the crushing of the undergrowth. We expected the strong but irate form of Rex Hambridge to break in upon us, levelling our refuge of sword grass and capturing us. But

nary a sound did we hear. We waited and waited, but only the calm sounds of the bush went on about us.

It was half an hour before we crawled out of the grass. We made our way to our secret treasure-hole and lifted out our lunches. We munched our sandwiches and drank our orange cordial. We gathered our cricket gear and made our way sedately from the bush. At least an hour had elapsed since we had lit the bomb fuses. We decided we would ever so casually walk past the place. If we were to see the blown letterboxes in their shattered state we would evidence only small surprise as would be fitting to anyone who might happen to walk past.

Roddie said, 'We'll walk past as though we never knew anything had happened.'

'As though, in fact,' I said, 'it was none of our business.'

So we walked past, casually swinging our bats, making a feint hit towards an imaginary ball, hooking it away to its equally imaginary boundary. We chatted lazily. We even looked a trifle bored. Yet our eyes were eager enough when we came to the Wright home. We masked the looks of delight. We affected mild horror at the sight. The box had been blown off the fence. Not even a bolt remained. In fact, the top portion of the fence on which the box had been fastened had also been blown away. Someone had gathered the pieces and they lay together in a heap at the foot of the fence. Feigning a little sorrow to mask our triumph, we passed on to the Hambridge place.

This was a delight. Roddie, ever the actor, said in surprise, 'I say, Goddie, they sure have blown up this letterbox!'

I nodded with pretended shock. 'Blown to smithereens,' I said.

'Blown sky-high,' said a voice. We looked up into the eyes of the famously handsome and only test cricketer-Rhodes scholar, Rex Hambridge. He was staring us in the eyes. What he knew or did not know we did not know. On a reflexive impulse of the utmost foolishness, triggered off by a deep and innate guilt—without a thought to bluff it through—we ran.

We ran! We ran, forgetting that it was the champion short-distance sprinter, and also the master of the 880 yards, who was in pursuit. We had forgotten that nobody ran like Rex H. ran. Scarcely ever did a ball reach any cricket boundary before Rex H. That was known throughout the cricket world. And how was it that, in the year in which Rex H. had been at Oxford, the Cambridge University cricket team had never won? Obviously because of the super playing and running of the Australian Rhodes scholar. There was no true Oxford without Hambridge.

Mind you, we were no novices when it came to the matter of running, especially bush-running. Bushrunning is very special running. It is an art in itself. You have to know how to bound, to leap, to curve in flight, to land on all fours, to spring high across creeks, and to sprint around groves of blackberry vines. You also have to know the special short cuts. You must know where fallen trunks lie in long grass, and how you can slip—here and there amongst tree ferns, thus gaining a few moments upon your pursuer.

So we ran. We ran skilfully. We ran as desperate men. We were urged on by guilt, motivated by the knowledge that our famous scholar was also pro-

ficient in the art of boxing. The hell of it was that there was little in which he was not proficient. To this day we pride ourselves that we stretched out one of the most famous sons of our land. In fact, we even had him panting, and as much as we were. We gave him a fair run for his money, but then we did not beat him. We had long since dropped the cricket bats that had our names inscribed on them. Our lunch boxes were scattered in some bush glade, all forgotten as we pounded on our way.

He caught us just before we reached Brown's paddocks. One hand grasped Roddie as a praying mantis grasps a fly, and the other gripped me by the shoulder and spun me around. The superb blue eyes were gleaming with enjoyment. The lips were set grimly. The hands were turgid with life, tensed, and waiting for overdue exercise and action. Fear, of course, gripped us. We showed no signs of triumph at his heavy panting. We were also panting. In that we were not superior to him. In any case, the joy of having led him a long chase died in the dread anticipation of what was about to happen.

He said grimly, 'You had better come and see my father.'

We went with him to see his father. As we went through the ornate gateway, he took us on to the lawn. He showed us every fragment and skerrick of the shattered letterbox. 'My,' he said, 'will you ever have to pay for this!' It was more an exclamation than a question, a statement of evident fact than a mere query. We gloomed our way towards the house.

A minor miracle had happened. Father had been called away suddenly. He had rolled out of the ornate

gateway in the Cadillac. So we had to wait for him. Whilst we waited, the young scholar delivered some special statements on the form of British social life, the indignity of invading a man's home which was generally understood to be his castle. He gave us a few of these sentiments, punctuated with the stabbing of a competent right-hand forefinger. We sat in gloom and misery, a captive audience to a righteous preacher of the law. We nodded when we thought it was appropriate and beneficial, but our heart was not in it.

He must have been a busy man himself, and after a time, when Father failed to return, he gave us the order to go. This order bewildered us, for we were sure he would have rung the police and delivered us up to them as two dangerous young operators. We thought he would have rung our fathers and told them of our crimes. However, he did not even ring the Wrights. Having lectured us, he was about to send us home.

I asked him anxiously, 'Are you going to tell our parents?'

He maintained his grim look. 'I imagine I could do that,' he said.

My heart sank. Facing a Rhodes scholar was one thing. In fact it was relatively simple, compared with facing my father. Roddie's Dad was a bit of a nonentity, but not my Dad. He had enough righteousness to supply a dozen families. His sensitivity to social protocol and social etiquette was enough to fill a book. Also he was an expert in forms of irony and corporal punishment. Somehow I could not face his indignation, and I let our friend know it.

I detected a faint gleam of sympathy, and hope was born. I looked mournful and he said, 'I tell you what. I'll have a new letterbox made, a replica of the old. I'll tell my father you are paying for it, and if he accepts that, we'll say no more.'

Relief flooded us like a southerly buster after days of hot westerly wind. We dared not show the relief, but it was there. I think he detected it. He even had a faint note of kindness in his voice, although his face remained stern. He took us to the gateway, and then in his best Oxford voice said, 'Cut, you two, and don't let this thing happen again!' We were about to cut, when he grabbed my shoulder.

'You report here every Saturday morning,' he said, 'until the letterbox is remade. I'll get you both to see my father, and we'll work out the price.'

We went back into the bush, recovered our cricket gear, and also our lunch boxes. We sat ourselves down in our favourite council-of-war grove, and planned our immediate future. It was primarily a matter of money. Money was one of the commodities we greatly lacked.

'It could cost a quid,' said Roddie. 'I reckon nothing less than a quid.'

'It couldn't!' I protested in horror. 'It just couldn't.' But I knew it could. I felt sick at the thought. Never in my life had I possessed more than a few shillings at a time. Once my grandfather had given me a sovereign, a lovely golden quid in itself, but the family had descended upon it like a horde of vultures. It was law in our family that we divided anything Grandpa gave us. In the end, I suppose, everyone benefited equally, but I hated the law. I hated it all right.

'So it is bottles,' said Roddie. 'Soft-drink bottles, beer bottles and the like. He paused. 'It is also cow manure, horse manure, and chook manure.'

'And bush humus,' I added heavily.

'Bush humus,' he agreed.

EVEN now I shudder at the memory of those months. Collecting bottles and going errands for pennies or threepences, and gathering manure in barrow-loads or bagsful is one thing when you don't have to do it. The little you earn is a sheer delight; but when it is all under the law of dire necessity, and when you know that every penny you earn by this hard labour is bound not for your pocket but for the pocket of another, there is little but bitterness you can experience. We ached as we salvaged beer bottles from gutters, rubbish bins, and swaggies' camps. We felt like prime beggars as we picked up the soft-drink bottles at cricket matches, school athletics, and from picnic places. We spent anxious moments hoping our hoarded bottles would not be found by vagrant Bottle-Os, and other youthful money-earners. It was all very distressing.

Even more distressing were the Saturday mornings. They were part of some ritual of the famous English university, I imagine. You did a sort of penance for your crime by sitting in the gracious but expensive sitting-room of the Hambridges, overawed and bowed down by the unrelenting dignity of it all. As time went on, we seemed to shrink to even smaller proportions than we had possessed when first we sat upon the immense and expensive lounge chairs.

Occasionally a vagrant thought gripped my mind, like, 'They could buy a letterbox and think nothing about it.' But then guilt would commence its work afresh, and I would be in horror at myself for the crime I had done. Saturday after Saturday we waited for Father, but Father never came. He was a bit like the Unknown God who lived a privatised existence in some place of utter remoteness. But then, he knew everything—that was the trouble.

We would ask the price of the letterbox. Not being given an answer was part of the torment. We suffered deeply, not knowing whether it was a quid or not. Also it had taken us a long time, and we were not yet to the fifteen shilling mark.

We suffered on, in what seemed to be an endless torment. At nights I would wonder whether Rex H. or his father would ring my own father, and tell him the whole story. Once or twice in my misery I hoped savagely they would. However, I would unhope very quickly, remembering my father's great powers of punishing. I preferred the forms of penance to which we were being subjected.

The Saturday morning came in which our Rhodes scholar told us the price of the letterbox. 'Twenty-five chillings,' he said, and we tried not to turn green in our faces. We were, of course, mournful, but we nodded and assured him we would pay.

'When will it be finished?' we asked.

He smiled patiently, for that question had often been asked. 'It *will* be finished,' he assured us quietly.

Finally the day of reckoning came. At the appointed hour we made our humble way to the Hambridge menage. That great mansion towered amid its

leafy trees, planted as it was within wide and flowing lawns, and adorned by gardens which surrounded it with brilliant flowers of every description.

The Rhodes scholar showed us the new letterbox. It was an exact replica of the old, with the exception of the new paint. Very fine it looked, glistening upon the fence, securely nailed and bolted against possible future bombings. Sadly we knew we would never again look a basket-bomb in the eye. Bamboo cane wrappings would forever be anathema to us, and Guy Fawkes' Day, a day of sorrowful remembrance. Nevertheless, we looked with a certain interest at the new letterbox, for in one sense it belonged to us. The interest, however, was not long-lived.

'Father is here today,' said Rex Hambridge to us. 'He has reserved this morning to talk to you two boys.'

Our hearts sank at that. In our pockets was a lot of silver. There were two-shilling pieces, shilling pieces, sixpences and threepences. There were also pennies — quite a few of them.

Father Hambridge was an unforgettable person. He was tall, broadly built, of fine stature, and had deep-set eyes in a noble head. His hair was brown to greying, and he stood even taller and broader than his own son. His hands were broad hands that seemed to possess immense strength.

'Sit clown,' he boomed. 'Sit down.'

He stared at us keenly for a moment. Then he looked across at his son. He barked out a rich laugh. 'So these are the rascals, eh?' he asked.

His superb son nodded gravely. 'These are they, Dad,' he said.

The old man began to chuckle, but stopped himself

abruptly. 'No time for laughing, eh?' he barked. 'You really devastated our old letterbox, eh?' He sucked strongly on his pipe, blowing out scented clouds. 'Devilish thing to do, you know.' We knew how devilish. Then he chuckled again. 'I bet you'll never do it again.'

'Never do it again,' we agreed in a fervent chorus.

He ruminated on that, walking up and down the long room, and sucking furiously.

'Needs punishment,' he said. 'That sort of thing can't be ignored, you know.'

No, it could not be ignored. We nodded sober agreement.

Then the old man laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks. 'My God!' he said, 'I should imagine you have been punished enough.'

We looked up at that, forgetting our shame. The old man laughed, pointing his pipe at his beloved son. 'That Rex there knows how to make people suffer,' he said, and he went off into a sharp, short laugh. Then he came across to us, standing above us and looking down.

'I tell you what,' he said suddenly. 'You young beggars go off and never do it again.'

We looked startled. 'Yes, sir,' we said hurriedly. 'We'll never do it again.'

He looked at the ceiling, sucked at his pipe and said slowly, 'No, I bet you never will.' Then, when we stood, he said impatiently, waving his pipe at us, 'Off with you now. Off home you go.'

'Yes, sir,' we said obediently, 'but first we have to pay for the box.'

'Oh, that,' he barked, and he laughed his famous

short laugh. 'Just don't worry about that.' I detected a gruff but tender note in his voice.

'Not pay for it?' I said, staring at him.

'Absolutely,' he said. 'Now, off with you. Don't waste any time.'

Roddie had been plunging his hands into his pockets, getting out handfuls of coins, and piling them on an occasional table.

The old man rumbled. 'My!' he said. 'What a lot of coins!'

He gestured impatiently. 'Put them back into your pockets,' he ordered roughly, 'and go home.'

We moved in a dream. We backed away from him and his special son. We backed out, just missing furniture in our confusion. Son Rex followed us out and down to the gate, watching us with amusement as we stared back at the grand old man. He, for his part, wasn't seeing us any more. He was chuckling away to himself, and every so often he would stoop from his great height and examine one of the special blooms in his garden.

At the gate the great man, his son, gave us a gentle cuff across the ears. 'Off with you, youngsters,' he said, 'and just don't do it again.'

'No,' we said, and we went.

We went straight into the bush, to our accustomed council grove. We sat like stunned ducks until the import of it all swept over us. Then we thumped the earth with excited fists.

'We didn't have to pay!' shouted Roddie.

'Not a smacker,' I said.

'Not even a penny,' he shouted.

'Not even a halfpenny,' I bettered.

'It's all ours,' said Roddie.

'Twenty-five lovely shillings,' I said. 'Twelve and sixpence each,' I added.

'But did we work hard for it!' exclaimed Roddie.

'Ah,' I agreed, 'we surely worked hard for it.'

We sat in joyful silence. The bush whistled, chortled, tinkled and pattered on. Together those sounds were like some sweet symphony of nature, and sweeter than ever before. We felt the money in our pockets until it was warm and moist.

All the time we were dreaming of things like icecreams, and sweets, follies and licorice. We were thinking of times at the matinee, and even of a new cricket ball or two—shiny red cricket balls with the seams unworn. We even fell to dreaming of other things, knowing there is scarcely any purchasing limit to the enormous sum of twenty-five shillings, or, if you like, twelve and sixpence each. The pain of the past had died away, and the heaviness of penance had lifted like a forgotten cloud.

'And to think,' said Roddie gleefully, 'that we actually blew up the Rhodes scholar's letterbox.'

'And to think,' I added, 'we didn't have to pay for

'Say,' said Roddie, 'wasn't his old man a great chap?'

'Wasn't he just!' I agreed.

We both sat back and pondered the whole matter, and after a time we fell to dreaming again, about icecreams, sweets and matinees, and also of red cricket balls, shiny with new paint and unworn at the seams of their finely sewn leather. Yes, it was mainly about red cricket balls that we were dreaming.

MEN WITHOUT MAKE-UP

(or, cows without cosmetics)

THE BOY looked up at the grizzled farmer. The farmer was not only grizzled, he was uncouth, plain uncouth. He represented all that the boy disliked. This man, this uncouth person, was to be his boss. In the interim, the farmer was trying to relate to the boy without much success.

'You,' he said to the boy. 'Are you Dennis James? Is that your luggage? What do you want with a typewriter? Can you really milk?'

The boy said nothing, grabbing his port in one hand and the typewriter in the other. He strode along the platform with the man. 'DUNGOG' the name said, and the country already looked foreign to him. He had watched it from the train window. There had been coarse grass alongside the railway lines. The tall timbers were impressive, but they were eucalypts that he had not previously seen. There was little dairy country to glimpse. They seemed to go endlessly around bends, rarely seeing any open country. He supposed there was open country.

He expected a utility truck at least, but instead there was a dray. He was disgusted at that. The

farmer obviously was not prosperous. He gave grudging assent to the town. It had points of interest. His main attention was caught by the local newspaper office. They might even want copy. He could not imagine what copy they would want. He gripped the typewriter even more tightly.

The town gave way to a bitumen road which was uneven and cracked. In turn, it gave way to a dirt road, one which wound through the tall timbers. He tried to pick out farmhouses through the trees, and occasionally succeeded. Their look did not impress him. 'Cow-cocky country,' he muttered under his breath. 'Typical North Coast stuff.' He was careful not to let his new boss hear him.

Finally they reached the farm on which he was going to work. Again the farmhouse did not please him. It did not matter. He was being put in a shed behind the house. It was unattractive, but it did please him. The furniture was homely and sparse. He put down his heavy port, and set the typewriter in its case on a rickety table. The chair was oldfashioned, with a cane seat. There was a hole in the seat, but doubtless he could sit on it.

'Come and meet the missus,' his boss said ungraciously. The missus looked better than the boss. In fact she looked gracious and matronly. Also she had kindly eyes. She pressed back strands of hair from her eyes, tucking them behind her ears, and welcomed him gently.

'You must be famished,' she said.

He nodded to her. 'Dennis is my name,' he said. 'Dennis James.'

She nodded back. 'Now sit yourself down and we'll

get you some food. Sausages and bacon and eggs. You could eat that?'

Yes, he could eat that. Come to think of it, he surely could eat it. He sat at the table. The grizzled boss said he was off to tidy up the dairy. He had had his breakfast. He would pick Dennis up after the meal.

She asked him if he could milk, and he nodded. The question pleased him. One thing these folk did not know. He was a champion milker. This was one thing at which he was an expert. He had heard of milking machines but had never seen them. In a way, he resented them. They hit against his special ability as a milker. Doubtless, too, they dried off the milkers prematurely.

He was going to like the food. He was also going to like the missus. She was a motherly type. Pity she had married this kind of man. Yet it was even possible that he was a good sort, under his rough looks. The boy hoped so.

After the meal he changed into moleskins and a bush shirt. He put on his heavy boots; not the rubber knee ones, but the leather ones with the heavy soles. They still had marks of the cow yard on them. The boss eyed them with gruff satisfaction.

'Can you milk?' he asked.

'Just a bit,' the boy muttered.

'We'll see about that later,' the man said. He nodded towards the buildings. 'I'll show you the dairy,' he said.

There was nothing special about the dairy. It was like ten thousand others in the State. It was rough, but clean. Even the milking stools were clean, not

coated with the customary sheen of thick, brown, dried milk where the milker had gripped them. The man was clean, anyway. He liked that.

Next they went to see the farm. That was what took his breath away. They were standing on a high ridge, and when he looked down he saw the deep green flats below. Even from this height he could recognise the rich stand of lucerne. It was lush. No less lush was the maize. He could see it was high, maybe twelve feet or more. He could see pumpkin and melon vines in the summer grass which was beginning to purple with seed. Something within him began to stir. He would have to revise his ideas about the farmer. He certainly knew how to cultivate.

What amazed him, however, were the steep slopes which led down to the flats. They were thick enough with grass, and the cows seemed easily able to negotiate them. He knew it would be tiring in this North Coast heat and humidity to climb up and down, herding the cattle. He hoped fervently that this wasn't his job.

'You could have a good job if you would wish it that way,' said the farmer quaintly. 'If you don't want a boss, you might as well go now.'

He looked at the man curiously. It was as though he could read his thoughts. 'I don't mind a boss,' he said. 'All I don't like is a bully.' The farmer must have missed the second half of the sentence.

'Ten bob a week,' he said, 'and we find for you.' He meant, 'We provide all board.'

The youth nodded. He knew that was about what most farmers did in these days when jobs were scarce. 'What about Sundays?' he asked.

The man's eyes narrowed. He looked a trifle crafty. 'Just the two milkings,' he said. 'Nothing more.' He looked at Dennis. 'Mind you,' he said, 'no going off on jaunts and tiring yourself out. Five o'clock we milk in the mornings. Three o'clock afternoons.'

Dennis nodded. 'That'll do me,' he said. 'I'm not a gadabout.' The man seemed happy about that. He nodded back.

Then he asked, 'Ever used a plough?'

'Single furrow, double furrow,' said Dennis. 'Disc or mouldboard. Single horse or team. I can handle them all.'

The farmer could scarcely conceal his satisfaction. 'It's still ten bob,' he grunted.

Dennis inclined his head. 'I understand,' he said.

The farmer said, 'We'll go down and cut some of that lucerne. Tomorrow we have spuds to dig.' Dennis could see they were going to work plenty. He would earn his ten bob.

At milking time, the boss said he would try Dennis out on a few of the strippers. 'I look after me cows,' he said gruffly. 'Specially them big milkers.'

They were big milkers, without doubt. They came in, a mixture of Ayrshires and Jerseys. Some were crossbreeds. The cows, for the most part, had large udders, tight with milk. The calves of the newly calved bawled their heads off from a pen nearby. The herd clattered in onto the cobbles of the cow yard. Dung splattered as they walked and swayed to the bails. The grass was lush, not at all like the dry sword grass he had seen alongside the railway lines. It was deep green, a rich paspalum, and it made the milk flow. Doubtless, too, the cattle were fed the

lucerne hay. They ate nothing in the bails, and Dennis herded them in, one by one, washed the teats and udders with the mixture of antiseptic and water, and sat down to milk.

The strippers were not easy. They had little to give. He coaxed them, nevertheless. The boss, whose name he had discovered, watched him out of the corner of his eye. He himself was a fair milker, but Dennis had seen better. He longed to get a cow freshly calved, and after half an hour or so the man gave him one.

She was a huge beast, a large-framed Ayrshire. She was calm enough too, but he put the leg rope on her. When he went to take her teats she lifted her leg. He warned her against that. She stared ahead, thinking the matter over. She decided he might be an expert. She gave him an opportunity. That was all he wanted. After stripping the first few threads of milk he began coaxing the flow. It came in quick, short bursts as his hands pumped the teats up into the udder. The cow shot up its first cud and began to dream. In no time the bucket was filled.

Tom Springer, his boss, looked at him. 'You ain't a skite, eh?' he asked.

Dennis didn't answer him. He was, amazingly enough, on his second bucket. 'She's a good milker,' he said.

'Special,' said Springer, and bent to his own beast.

The boss was pleased when they had finished the milking. 'Fifteen minutes less,' he said. He looked at Dennis with slight suspicion. 'You sure you milked 'em right gut?' he asked.

Dennis looked sour and said nothing. The man

gave a sly grin. 'We'll soon find out when we weigh it,' he said. 'That's the way I check it. Pity help someone if it's less.'

It wasn't less. It might have been a fraction more. Only the time had been less.

DENNIS had known hard work, but never harder than this. He wondered about the turnover of workers on the Springer farm. One day, when he was hoisting bags of fertiliser onto the dray, he heard things about Tom Springer, his boss. People looked at him, astonished that he had stayed so long. Generally it was only a few days. 'Tight as a fish,' one of them said, 'and that's watertight.'

Dennis didn't grin at that. There was nothing funny about Springer, but then, for him there wasn't anything funny about life, either. He kept remembering the quarrel he had had with his father and why he had left the farm; why he had made it so far away from his own home. There had been pressure there, too—pressure to work all day, and into the evening—but then he had loved the work. It was only the lack of leisure time which made him frustrated, and, later, angry. So he had left.

Sundays were supposed to be his own. His father had agreed to that years ago, and in a way that had always been the arrangement. But that was not how it had worked out. On Sundays his father would work; not all the time, but at silly, trifling things, things he begrudged the time for during the week. There was sort of mental pressure, a kind of subtle blackmail that took Dennis's attention from the

thing he wanted most to do. You either had the day and you did it, or you didn't.

He would have liked the early mornings when everything was fresh and clear. But he had to go out and bring in the cows. He had to set the stockfeed into the bails. He had had to mix it, get the separator ready, and have the water on hand to wash the udders. After that, his brother Garry and his father would come. They would join him in the milking. The small break he had in the afternoon before the second milking was too brief to concentrate on what he loved most.

What he loved most was writing. Stories would form in his brain when he nestled up against a cow and coaxed the flow down. They were in his head when he and his brother sighted up posts in the fencing. When he had Dolly and Perch in the double disc plough, the stories still went on.

One day a story had not been returned, but accepted. No other experience of life had been so rich. That was when he decided writing must come even before farming, much as he loved the latter. He had decided to get a farm of his own one day, and do both farming and writing. He used to think, 'Ah, that'd be the life.' But he had no money.

The Sunday before he left had decided him. He was writing a story when his father began to work outside the window, chipping away in the house garden, chopping out shrubs, and then getting the barrow and barrowing them away to the rubbish pile. He felt the pressure of it, and raged all through the afternoon milking. Finally he decided to talk it out with his father, but they were made of the same

material, shaped up with the same obstinacy. Neither would give way, and he had left.

To the last, his father would not believe it. He argued that half the farm belonged to him, Dennis. Where would Dennis see stock as good as their Australian Illawarra Shorthorns, and who had Large Whites and Berkies like the pigs in their stud? He knew it was all true, even to the half of the farm, but it was nothing when compared with his desire to write, and this his father did not understand.

SUNDAY was the test. The first Sunday went well. He finished the early milking, locked himself away and put his typewriter out with clean sheets of blank paper. He sat and looked at the typewriter. Nothing came, except the face of his father, the anger of them both, and the foolish things they had each said—few of which were really true. He ate in his own room and then went off for the afternoon milking. Mrs Springer unexpectedly brought them both scones and tea, and he was gratified.

The second Sunday was interrupted. Springer was worried about his big Ayrshire bull. Somehow it had broken through into the scrub, and a hand was needed. Dennis felt his anger rising, but then he knew Springer hadn't arranged the escape of the bull. They both went searching, and found that the beast had broken into Wright's place and was serving that herd, a few of the cows being on heat. The bull hadn't liked being headed back for home, and they spent hours getting him through. Then they had to repair the fence. By the time he regained his room he was

too tired. He slept in the early afternoon, and when Springer wakened him, he could easily have quarrelled with him.

Slowly he began to be irked. His common sense told him that the farmer was using him as he wouldn't have dared use another man. True, jobs were hard to get, but what kind of a job was this? If it wasn't mowing lucerne, it was pulling cobs of corn. If it wasn't piling melons onto the dray, it was digging spuds. Then there was the ploughing and the mending of fences. There was, of course, the milking too. By the time night came he was bone tired. He would drop into bed and sleep.

One or two nights he had tried to write. He only had a hurricane lamp for light, and it didn't sit well for typing. He would put it on top of a pile of books, but if he turned it up, the glass chimney would blacken. If he turned it down, the light was not enough. In any case, his mind was too tired. The one night when inspiration had come, he had worked late, and when he turned up for milking Springer was unusually silent. Finally he asked him, wearily, what was the matter. Springer told him that he had seen his light on early in the morning. Dennis wondered whether he was worrying about the cost of kerosene.

He was probably correct, but Springer only grunted. 'I want you fresh when you come in the morning,' he said. 'How the hell can you work in the day if you sit up at night?'

Dennis knew that what he said was right, but he resented it. He had come to work, earn his keep, and save a little money, but he had also come to write.

Once free from his father and the home farm, he had hoped for a different world—one in which he would find inspiration. No stories had come, however, not when he had his head tucked into a milking cow, and never when he worked on the flats, ploughing, digging and carting. His anger began to grow.

By the end of the first month he knew that Springer valued him highly. The grizzled farmer, of course, said nothing. His uncouth ways had not changed. Occasionally, however, he lost his taciturn manner. In an unguarded moment he would let a statement slip. He would almost praise Dennis. His signature word on those occasions would be, 'By-cri!' and Dennis would know he was in a good mood. Good, anyway, for Springer. Early on, Springer had made sarcastic comments whenever his wife brought afternoon tea to the bails. He was a parsimonious man, and hated anything that smacked of kindness or extravagance. Lately, however, he had not objected when she brought scones and tea. Sometimes she brought honey cakes which Dennis had liked.

Other farmers in the town began to talk to him. They decided he must have been made of better stuff than they had previously thought. They could not remember anyone staying with Springer longer than three weeks. 'He's a slavedriver,' they told Dennis. 'Don't let him get away with it.' Some of them had offered him a job, but somehow he hadn't felt free to take other work. His mind was on his room and his typewriter.

On the fifth Sunday Springer had come to him for help. He had almost apologised, and that alone saved Dennis from flaring up. One of his best milkers was

calving and having difficulty, and Dennis knew how to help a dam calve. He knew just how to pull, and when, and Springer was not adept at this sort of thing. In fact, he hadn't known that a man could help a cow. Dennis marvelled at that, wondering what kind of a cow cocky his boss really was. Even though he liked the work, he had built up a rage, and when he returned had no hope of writing. He scowled all through the milking, and barely had the grace to be grateful for the special afternoon tea. It was only the fact that Mrs Springer was maternal towards him which saved the day.

When two months had passed, Dennis began to settle. One morning the idea for a story came to him. Curiously enough, it came Tom Tom Springer. The farmer, in one of his rare moods, had told a story to Dennis, and Dennis saw the possibilities in it. However, it was Springer himself who figured most. Dennis had begun to analyse him.

Dennis himself was essentially shy. He knew that. He could rarely express himself, which was probably why he liked writing. There he could let himself go. He could spread out before himself, on paper, the elements of his thinking, and even he knew they were good. Tom Springer had worried him. He could scarcely believe any man could be so excessively frugal, so much a slavedriver, and so mean in spirit. He began to ask himself the reason for this, and the results he was getting formed the material for his story. He could scarcely wait for Sunday. Excitement grew, but at the same time he was tense, wondering whether Tom Springer would try to invade his time.

On the Saturday afternoon Springer was almost

friendly. He laid a hand on Dennis's shoulder. He also looked a trifle embarrassed, and Dennis became suspicious.

'I've got a problem,' the farmer said, 'and I wondered if you could help me.'

Dennis waited. The farmer went on. 'I've got poddies out there in the scrub. I've got steers that are eighteen months old and none of the young stock has ever been branded.'

Dennis remained silent. Springer went on a little nervously. 'I wondered whether you could give me a hand tomorrow to brand them.'

Later, thinking it over, Dennis cursed himself for a shy fool. He knew instinctively that the old codger had worked a swiftie. The farmer had calculated to perfection how to catch him and wangle time from him. He felt his anger rising, as he thought it over. He walked into Dungog that evening and wandered miserably around the shops, which were closed. The young people in the milk bar stared at him, but he didn't care. A black mood had taken him and he lived in it all night, and woke in it in the morning.

After breakfast they began the branding. Dennis felt the anger rise even further when he saw the number of animals in the stockyards. He knew there was no crush and concluded that they would have to throw the poddies, the steers and the young heifers. He knew his day was destroyed, as far as writing was concerned. The black anger settled in him, and he had no smile for the farmer.

Springer for his part was in an unusually good humour. Dennis thought sourly that the old fellow was calculating how many hours he was getting free,

and what it would have cost him for expert help. He knew the farmer depended on him to do things no jackaroo would even know or be able to handle.

This was the truth. Springer, for all his experience, was not good with stock. He was an expert with the soil, with growing crops, and even with pastures; but he was awkward with animals. Dennis thought he was even afraid.

They worked their way through the stock. The poddies were simple enough. One could throw them, twist the head back on the neck, have a knee across the chest, and in a moment the hot iron had plunged, searing the flesh, and before the smoke had cleared the calf was gone. The young heifers were not too bad. It was the yearling steers which were really demanding. Dennis would catch one by the horns, put his fingers into the nostrils, give a twitch, twisting the head whilst Springer twisted the tail, and in a flash they were thrown, Dennis holding them whilst Springer ran for the hot brand.

All through the action, Springer kept looking nervously at an eighteen-month-old bull. It was a fine Ayrshire, bigger than its frame ought to have been for eighteen months. Also it had a look in its eye that boded ill for the two men. Dennis kept wishing there was a cattle crush. He even wondered whether it might not be worth the time to build one, seeing his Sunday was ruined anyway. It might even save time. He supposed Springer was too mean even to make a crush.

He was interested in the branding in spite of himself. Also a minor miracle was happening. He noticed that Springer deferred to him, even if only slightly.

He knew that the farmer had some element of conscience or, rather, guilt, but that his greed or desire to save money counteracted it. However, in this situation, not quite. Dennis realised that morally, in the case of the branding, he had the upper hand. Also he noticed that Springer was dreading the time when they would be confronted by the Ayrshire bull.

Something was happening to him, too. He was remembering his lost Sundays, not only here, but back at home, and the memory of the one story which had been accepted kept coming to him. The thought of Springer cheating was bad enough, but now a whole line of Sundays stretched before him, each one of them a blank. Without knowing it, something was moving in his mind. Two images were coming together, that of Springer and that of his father. They merged in a conspiracy to keep him from writing. Dennis was sensible enough to know that there was no actual conspiracy, and in his normal moments he knew that his writing didn't matter all that much. He liked it, but then, it was the excitement of having a story accepted which kept him writing—that, and the fact that he actually loved writing. Stories came to him unbidden, and he had to write them.

He was getting angry with Springer. The larger the steers, the weaker Springer seemed to be. Twice he had let go of a steer and Dennis had been left holding the tail. Not only was it frustrating, but it was dangerous. A steer might suddenly turn, even out of fear. Damage could be done. It was no little thing to be doing the branding this way. Other farmers would have been amazed to know the two were doing it on their own, throwing the steers without ropes. They

would have considered it unsafe. In fact, Dennis knew it was, and so did Springer. Dennis knew it was the farmer's greed, his parsimony, and his meanness. His own father had not been mean, but he had wanted to use his sons. They were to have no life but the one he had planned for them.

Dennis felt his anger growing, and he knew it was not only wrong, but dangerous. As they grabbed the next steer, it was he who grabbed the horns, felt along the head, gripping the nostrils. In a deep rage he threw the steer with such force that Springer did almost nothing. Dennis had remained tight-lipped, knowing the farmer was boss, but now he shouted and Springer lost his sour look and became almost servile. He ran for the brand.

At this point the drama commenced. They had only the young bull, but it was a bull that had been learning all the morning. They would have done better to have branded him at the beginning, when they were not tired. Both men knew of the danger, and both knew that they needed the closest co-operation. The younger sensed the fear of the older man—both of him, Dennis, and of the bull. The bull for his part was dodging around other stock. The animals had been kept in the yard to make it easier to catch the unbranded ones amongst the mob. The morning, however, had been a restless one, and the smell of fear was with the stock. The branded beasts were wary of the two men and kept backing away. Sometimes they would stand with lowered horns and wild eyes, their tails flicking as though they would attack, but after a time they would move away, milling behind the other cattle. The Ayrshire bull kept behind

them all. Once, though only for a moment, Dennis grasped the tail, but the farmer had missed the head. Dennis let go smartly.

For half an hour they circled, trying to catch the beast. Dennis saw something like a red cloud before his eyes. He knew his anger was foolish, and dangerous, but he could not stem it. It was queer how in one moment he saw his father, and in the next the grizzled farmer. He saw himself again in that early morning on Dungog Station, being met by this bleak man and feeling the loneliness and emptiness of being away from home. There he had felt like a small boy. Here, suddenly, he had become a man. Because of the hours wasted and time dissipated, he felt this swelling rage. It was not that he hated the man who was cheating him. He despised him for the mean character he was.

Incredibly, they caught the bull. Dennis grabbed the tail as Springer grabbed the horns. The bull let out a strangled bellow and bucked, tossing its head. Dennis saw the terror in the eyes of the older man, and in the terror the man let go. In a flash the tail slipped from his hands, and the bull was gone, bucking, leaping, bounding, and giving its enraged bellows.

Dennis kept silence. He looked at the farmer, and the older man turned away. Dennis gripped his palms with his fingers. His teeth ground together, and he threw out his hands in something like despair. Springer was watching him closely, assessing him. He muttered something about the bull being tricky, but he could not counter the disgust in Dennis's eyes. They returned to trying to catch the bull again.

Another thirty minutes, and nothing happened. Perhaps even the bull was tiring, but rage kept the younger man from tiring—grim determination sustained him. At the same time, he was sending out angry signals to the older man, threatening signals in fact, and Springer was at last under the grip of his own guilt. Even he could not justify the wastage of his employee's day. Lunch was almost on them, and there was little time before the afternoon milking. The farmer summoned up some hitherto unused reserve and made a rush at the bull, forcing it into a corner. He grabbed at the head and caught it. He gripped his hands tightly on the horns, then one hand went out seeking the nostrils. Dennis was on the tail in an instant.

Springer had reckoned without the sheer fright of the bull. Massive shoulders tightened, the great chest with its unusual girth muscled to capacity, and in a moment the head had twisted up and to the right, the horns had escaped, and even Springer's fingers in the nostrils could not hold it. In a flash it was gone.

For years to come, Springer was to recount the drama that followed. For always it would be etched in his memory, and etched vividly.

He saw the young man who was his employee grip the tail as never a man had done. He saw the muscles on the bare chest tighten to steel, and he heard a voice commanding him, 'Grab him again, you mug! Grab him quick!'

How could he grab him? The bull was bellowing with fright, bucking, leaping, jumping, trying to strain forward and get rid of the devil that held his

tail. Dennis had it in two hands of steel. Hundreds of pounds of wild, frightened bull strained against 170 pounds of enraged youth. There was no fear in the latter. He was proving himself against two men who were cheating him of life, and he was not going to be beaten. He was still shouting to the older man, but the older man had cowered back, fearful of where the bull might go, and all the time Dennis hung on.

Then the bull was free. He was free without doubt, but free only because his tail was skinned. As he had bucked, leaped and strained, the young man had gripped so tightly that something had to give. The bull would not give. The young man would not give, so the skin on the tail—like a stripped sheath—gave way, and the bull went flying, first into the dust of the cow yard, and then up and across the rails of the stock fence, towards the scrub.

The young man was standing in the middle of the stockyard, the cattle shying away from him, crowding in one corner, and there, in his hands, both still gripped together, was the skin sheath, slightly dripping with blood. Dennis looked at it with unbelieving eyes.

All Springer could say was, 'Oh cri! Oh, cri!' He was shaking his head and repeating his statement, as though somehow it might change things. He had never known a bull with a ringbarked tail, and he just couldn't assess his loss. Also he knew in his heart that his old authority was gone, especially over the young man. He would never dismiss him, of course. Nor would he ever again cheat him of a Sunday. He had miscalculated on this fellow. He had overplayed his hand. The young fellow was no boy,

really. He was a man. He wondered what he would do.

Dennis for his part had stopped looking down at the skin in his hands. He threw it in the dust, over by the stock rails. He came over and looked at Springer. He had no argument with Springer now. For that matter, he had no argument with his own father. Both men seemed different. In a way, they seemed irrelevant. He had his own life, and if they wanted something of him, then they would have to see about that themselves.

'I guess I won't come in for lurch,' he said. 'I'll use what time I've got left.'

Springer said slowly, 'Tell you what. The Missus can bring it across to you. Tell you what also. I'll do the milking on me own. Just this once.'

Dennis looked him in the eye. He knew what the man was doing was unprecedented. Suddenly he felt sorry for him. 'That's all right,' he said, and his voice was almost gentle.

Then he was not looking at the farmer any more. His gaze grew a little absent, as though he were looking at something in the sky. But he wasn't. In his mind's eye he was sitting at his typewriter. A story was forming, and in the centre of the story was the grizzled old farmer. Or was it his father? He didn't quite know. What he did know was that his anger had gone, maybe forever.

In its place there was a story. He was watching himself typing that story. He nodded absently to Springer and walked towards his room.

HUMOUR OF THE WAR TIME

THEY should never have asked for a story, because they were living in one. Later they would look back and marvel at that story, but they were children, and living was not a story—it was just being in the everyday; but then it was living on the Indian subcontinent.

It was his daughter Pauline—the one with the dark flowing hair and the gentle brown eyes—who asked for a special story.

'Daddy,' she said, 'you never tell us any stories about the war, and about your days in the Japanese prison camp.'

He thought about that for the moment, but Grace broke in with her protest.

'That's right, Daddy,' she said; 'you never tell us anything like that.'

He thought she was a bit of an echo of her older sister, but then Beth reinforced them.

'Is it too terrible to tell, Daddy?' she asked.

He laughed heartily. 'Not at all, biddies,' he said. 'I just thought you would like "The Magic Bedstead" or "The Ghost of Bullabakanka" better than some old stories about a war.' These were two of their favourite

serials which he made up as he went along, each night, just before they slept.

'No!' they chorused. 'We like those and we want them all the time, but we would like one about the war.'

Pauline's voice became almost ghostly. 'Did you ever kill anyone?' she asked earnestly.

He grinned at the question he had been asked hundreds of times by others. He put on his special strange look, and spoke in his special mysterious voice.

'I never tell anyone about that sort of thing,' he said, and they accepted the finality of his refusal.

Charles—the oldest—was looking at him with his serious, penetrating eyes. His father looked back at him and gave a knowing nod. It seemed to satisfy his only son, swimming as he was in the ocean of femininity—one mother and five sisters.

The six children were half sitting, half lying on the wide *charpai* (their parents' rope and wooden bed, with its huge mattress), and the father was lying in the centre, his head on a pillow whilst Elaine combed his hair. Each night this custom of combing was a bribe to keep him telling his stories, and it was also a fight to keep him awake. Sometimes—and he knew this—he would drift into half sleep, and then his statements would be almost incoherent, lacking rational progression. Then they would warn him and awake him again.

'Daddy,' they would say sternly, 'you're going to asleep. You are not making sense.'

With a sigh he would stop the drift and recommence 'The Magic Bedstead' or 'The Ghost of Bullabakanka', and they would lose their tension.

All of this would happen as the fierce burning heat of the Pakistani day, and the incessant hot wind—the *Loo*—was changing to the comparative coolness of the Sindh night. The wind would come across the hot desert in the day, but then in the evening the temperature would drop and the *Loo* would be merciful. They liked it flowing in through the courtyard and on to the parental bed. They had had their evening meal of curry and rice, *chapattis*, mangoes and homemade ice-cream, and they were contented. The three older children—Charles, Elaine and Veronica—were down from their school in the Murree hills for the Christmas holidays, and they wanted stories at night, to cap off the adventures of their days.

Charles said in a serious voice, 'I think it would be good, Dad, if you were to tell us something of your war days. Really, we need to know these things.'

It wasn't because those war memories disturbed him that he hadn't told them to the family. It was just that he was busy about other things. Also he thought it best to speak of the things of peace and not of war; but now he could hear some sense in his son's request. The boy wanted to know, and he spoke for the family.

He grinned. 'I tell you on one condition: that I tell you some of the funny things.'

That suited them fine. They nodded silently—the six of them.

'One of the funniest things,' he said, 'was the soldier who was in the convalescent hospital where I was a librarian. He could not sleep during the night because of the noise of the frogs. Tropical frogs—the ones they have in Malaya—have deep voices. Malaya

is always wet, so the frogs are many. At night times they have choirs. When you walk around they will stop croaking in one choir and start in another. When you reach the second choir it will stop, and the first one will begin. You are never without frogs chanting and croaking.'

'O-o-oh,' said Grace. 'I wouldn't like that.'

'This chap—Isaac—he used to go around every night marking out where the frogs were, and it seemed they were all in the slit trenches.'

Veronica asked, 'What are slit trenches?'

He told her. 'They are trenches we had to dig and then get into when the bombers came, dropping their bombs. You crouched down and the flying bombsplinters would miss you.'

The girls shuddered, but Charles looked stolid.

'Isaac used to mark out which slit trenches the frogs were in. The frogs liked to get into them to lay their eggs, because there was always a bit of water from the day's rain.'

Veronica looked appalled. 'Did you have to get into them with water in them?'

'Not in the beginning,' her father said. 'It was years before the bombers came—the American bombers, I mean—and then we certainly had to use them.'

His face lit up with yet another memory. 'We had a chap with us named Alf, and he had a big black Bible he carried everywhere. He was a good medical orderly and looked after the sick soldiers, but he always looked a bit grim. When the bombers did come, everyone would try to get into Alf's slit trench. His eyes danced with merriment as he told the story.'

'What do you mean?' asked Beth. 'Why would they want to get into Alf's trench?'

'Well,' said her father, 'they thought that God wouldn't let a bomb drop on Alf—not even the fragment of one and so they wanted to be where Alf was.'

Charles grinned at that bit of human reasoning.

Their father went on, 'Well, Isaac would always walk about on moonlight nights, since we didn't have torches or flashlights, and he would mark out the slit trenches in which the frog choirs were, and next day he would go back to get the frogs and kill them.'

Grace's delicate jaw dropped. 'Kill them?' she asked, horrified.

Her Daddy nodded. 'Now the funny thing was that he never found one frog in any slit trench. Somehow they were gone by daylight. Poor old Isaac could not sleep in the night because of their noise, and he could find no frog to kill in the day.'

'Poor, poor Isaac,' said Pauline. Only the older three grinned. The younger ones were all for Isaac, and saw nothing humorous.

'THE SECOND funny story,' said their father, 'is about bedbugs.' He looked at them.

'Have you heard the little poem about bedbugs?'

They hadn't, but they let him go on. Only Grace was wide-eyed. In a deeply emotional voice he told them,

*The June bug has its wings of gold,
The firefly its wings of flame,
The bedbug has no wings at all
But he gets there just the same.*

They all grinned, and Grace wanted to know what it meant.

'It means,' said her father, 'that nothing will stop a bedbug getting where he wants to get. A bedbug is a smelly insect with many legs, and he has a long snout which bites into your skin and draws blood which he drinks. After he has bitten you, you itch, but that wouldn't matter so much if he didn't smell so awful. Even when you are asleep, you can smell him a mile off. If you squash him the smell is even worse! It never seems to leave you.'

Pauline was agog, her eyes softly brown in sympathy. 'Poor Daddy,' she said. The other girls nodded. Charles waited.

'well,' their father said, 'there was this man—this soldier who was a prisoner like us all, and he hated bedbugs. He would do everything to defeat them. He put the iron legs of his bedstead in tins of water to stop them getting to the bed. Sadly enough, there were buys' eggs laid everywhere on his mattress, and they turned into little bugs which turned into big bugs which he smelled—and they nearly sent him mad. Like the rest of us, he was in hospital, and he could not sleep at night for the smell of bugs.'

'During the day he would collect the bugs, one by one, and he would put them in a matchbox. He liked us all looking at him as he captured each bug. He would have a wonderful smile when he caught one.'

'One day he had to go to the lavatory, and he left the matchbox on his bed, and "Digger" Courtney, one of the patients, got out of bed, opened the matchbox, and let all the bugs go on the bed.'

'Oh!' said all the children, including the older,

more self-controlled Charles. They were horror-struck.

'We told Digger that he was a cruel so-and-so, but he just looked at us calmly and said, "Oh, I'm doing him a good turn. That's his life—catching bugs. If he didn't have any to catch, he would go bonkers. Catching these again is a help to him and his mental health."'

With difficulty the children understood this bit of army wisdom, and then they grinned—with the exception of Grace and Pauline.

Charles actually sniggered. 'What happened when he returned from the toilet?'

'He went raving mad for a time, and called the guys everything. Then he set about catching them again. Digger was absolutely right.'

THE FATHER looked at the children. 'Then there was the time when we went into a camp where Indians had been. Their religion was to not eat animals, so there were up to a hundred cats in that camp when the Indians moved out and we moved in. Some of us had the first meat we had eaten in nearly two years.'

All the children were horrified. 'You didn't eat cats?'

He said, 'You asked me to tell you stories. That's a true story. We ate eats.' He looked a trifle sad. 'I never got to eat one of them. You could get nine dollars for a cat, then. I would have liked to have caught one, but I couldn't run.'

They murmured their sympathy for a wounded and partially disabled father.

‘They jugged the cats, just like they jug hares in England. They buried them for some days until the strong cat smell left, and then they could cook a nice stew out of pussy.’

Pauline looked as though she might retch, so her father told them how cunning the last nine cats became. Nothing could entice them to come near the prisoners.

‘The trouble was,’ said Daddy, ‘that one of the prisoners caught a cat. It was big, fat and gentle, and came to them quite easily. After they killed and jugged it, one of the Japanese guards came looking for his favourite tabby; but by this time it was underground. He stamped off in a fury.’

‘Didn’t the Japanese have a sense of humour?’ asked Charles.

‘Maybe they did,’ said the father, ‘but it wasn’t our kind of humour. We would hear them laughing, but we didn’t know what triggered them off.’

‘One day one of the chief guards told us about Australia being bombed. “Darwin bomb-bomb,” he said. The Australians looked sad. “Townsville bomb-bomb,” he said with a malicious grin. He went through all the cities. One of the Aussies asked him, with a straight and forlorn face, “Snake Gully bomb-bomb?”

‘The guard nodded his head vigorously. “Yes,” he agreed, “Snake Gully bomb-bomb.” The men tried to keep a straight face. In those days there was no Snake Gully. It was just a joke name. After the guard left, the men began to roar with laughter, and the tears were rolling down their cheeks. The Japanese guard came running back. He seemed puzzled.

“You people do not care that Australia bomb-bomb all over?” he asked us.

We tried to look sad, but the laughter broke out again, and after a time the guard went away disgusted.

One day he came back and this time he was laughing. “You hear the good news?” he asked. When we said we hadn’t, he said, “Tokyo bomb-bomb!” We couldn’t believe our ears, or our eyes. Why was he laughing? We asked him.

‘He grinned a lot and said, “Tokyo bomb-bomb. Me Nagasaki.” He meant that he and his family didn’t live in Tokyo but in Nagasaki.’

‘You mean just like Sydney and Melbourne?’ said Charles. ‘Inter-city rivalry?’

Their father realised his war humour was a bit beyond most of them. He asked them, ‘Will we go back to “The Magic Bed”?’

‘No! No! No!’ they shouted emphatically. They liked the serial story, but they kept wanting to hear about their father and his war days.

‘ONE DAY,’ he told them, ‘a Japanese officer who had been educated in America came. We used to call him “the Yank”. He came to give us a lecture on milking Japanese petrol tanks, and selling the petrol on the black market, where you could get a lot of money. He sort of preached to the men, who nodded in agreement. They wanted him to think it was a terrible thing to do—to milk petrol tanks of Japanese vehicles. “The Yank” actually got to preaching about it, as though he were a minister in the church pulpit.

‘He said, “The Imperial Japanese Army will punish anyone caught milking petrol tanks or selling petrol.”

‘The troops before him nodded in earnest agreement. “The ‘Yank” saluted, and the parade was dismissed. “The Yank” got into his car, and the driver started the engine. They had gone about thirty yards when the engine stalled. Some of the Aussies had milked the petrol tank while he was talking!’

The children liked that story, and they were looking for more. The father thought for a time, and then began to smile.

‘We had what we called “muster parades”. Each evening the Japanese would have a rollcall, and pity help the Allied commanding officer if anyone was missing!’

‘In our convalescent hospital there were so many amputees—men with only one leg. One of the Japanese soldiers would walk along counting the legs, two by two, and when he finished he would bark out the number of prisoners present. The men tried to keep a straight face when he got an odd number.’

Charles eyes were unbelieving. ‘Oh, come on, Dad,’ he said, ‘You don’t expect us to believe that, do you?’

His father nodded in agreement. ‘Sounds farfetched,’ he said, ‘but it is so. True, the Jap gave up that method, but it happened.’

His father went on: ‘We had identical twins. For fun they would fall in at opposite ends. The Japanese found it hard to distinguish us, one from another, but they thought they had us when they found the same prisoner at the right end when he had been marker at the left. The Japanese would give a harsh bark

like a dog when anything confused them. This particular officer held on to the twin who was the marker, then shot off to get to the end—so he thought—before the marker. When he got to the end, there was the same face and figure. He grabbed the twin at the end of the line and frog-marched him up to the marker, and there was the identical person!

‘He scratched his head, looked at the two, and then let out a great roar of laughter. Of course, he could have become angry and bashed the twins, but he didn’t.’

It was then that their father said story-time was ended. It was customary for the children to protest, and cry urgently, ‘Daddy! Daddy! No! We want more stories.’

Mostly he would refuse to go on, and tonight he was about to do that when Charles asked, ‘What about the serious side of the war and the prison camp?’

His father could sense that Charles was wanting something to be said, that he had often wished his father would talk about war. All the children had gone silent, waiting.

He sat up. ‘I guess I never wanted to make out that war is a great thin’,’ he told them. ‘At the same time you see greatness in war that you rarely see in peacetime, so it is difficult to tell you much. Perhaps one of these nights I will tell you some of the great things that happened. Not just about certain men who seemed naturally brave, but about some who were timid and fearful by nature, and how they kept on doing their job when they were scared.’

‘Tell us now,’ said Grace, with her most winning smile.

Her father smiled back, gently. ‘Not tonight, biddy,’ he said. ‘It will have to wait for some other time. Let’s say prayers, and then off to sleep.’

He knew they wouldn’t sleep. They would talk until they were told to be quiet. Then one or other would want water to drink, and it would be difficult to deny the child, since the days had been very hot.

One by one they tumbled under their mosquito nets, and he and their mother tucked them in. When he came to Charles’ bed he saw the disappointment on his face. The lad was close to tears. For a long time he had wanted to know about the war. They talked at school about how dreadful and wrong war was—and is—and he had felt shame for his soldier-father. His father sensed some of this as he looked down at him.

‘Come to the study, Charles,’ he said softly, so that the girls would not hear him.

In the study his father went to a cabinet and brought out a box, and opened it. In it were his warservice medals, and decorations. He explained them to his son, and they sat, facing each other whilst he tried to explain war—a difficult task for them both. He told stories of the brave fearful people, and the fearful brave people, and, because the years had mellowed his own views, he could see the tension lifting from his son, and he knew that Charles was coming to know what he—the father—had come to know.

They walked quietly back to the bed, but before Charles slipped under the net and a sheet, he turned to his father. His arms groped to find and make a

hug, and then the father felt his tears on his cheek, and they both clung, silently.

Charles said, ‘Thanks, Dad,’ and he was under the mosquito net. Usually he insisted on tucking himself in. This time he let his father do it.

His father wandered out on to the college campus, and looked up at the stars which were placed differently in this northern hemisphere. However, he could see the Southern Cross hanging in its different place, and he nodded to it, as though there was something to his nod. He walked around until the flood of memories was stemmed, and then went back to his wife. She seemed to understand.

Meanwhile the *Loo* flowed its cooling waves over them, and along with the children they drifted off into sleep which halts memories or lets them flow afresh in nameless dreams.

I KILLED THE GIANT MACAW

It is true. I did kill that noble creature, even though I did not touch him with one finger, nor administer poison to him, nor do anything that normal killers do when they cause death. The fact is clear and unmistakable. I killed the beautiful and regal Macaw.

It is a relief, after all these years, to come out into the open and confess to the killing. I stop short of saying 'the murder', because there can be a difference between killing and murder. In this case it was killing but not murder. You may say that it was by implication murder, and I would be helpless in the face of your indictment. Technically you may be correct. However, in the spirit of the thing—that is, not in the letter—I surely killed the Giant Macaw.

I never told Grandpa I had done this dastardly thing. I never even told my Dadda or my Mumma. They would have been shocked and horrified beyond measure to think their Paul would have committed such an act. In fact they may even have smiled at me, had I told them—smiled indulgently, I mean. Even so, their smile would have been an incredulous one. They would never have been able to bring them

selves to believe me capable of such an action. I, for my part, had rationalised the event as neglect but not killing. Only now, some sixty-five years or so later, can I come to admit fully that I was the killer. As I have said, it is a great relief to bring the matter out, air it, and get it over. If Grandpa were here I would tell him. I would also tell Dadda and Mumma, but probably they are with Grandpa, and the three of them know, anyway. I am not sure how things work over the other side, but I guess they know. Thinking about that adds to my relief. Even so, I am glad they are not on this side if they have found out.

How did I kill the Giant Macaw? I must tell the story quietly, slowly, and gently. Only in that way can I get you to see it from my point of view. It is because I do not want you to think of me as a vicious killer that I would like you to consider what happened. Had I done the thing deliberately and in cold blood, then I would not blame you, were you to reject me wholly; but does a child of six callously take on a bird, a giant tropical parrot which stands higher than himself, and, in doing so, kill him? I doubt it.

It all began when Grandpa planned to revisit Ireland. Grandpa was, of course, Irish. When I say 'Irish', I mean *aristocratic* Irish. I will spare you my innate snobbery, but I get great pleasure from knowing that Grandpa came from a high family in what we called the South of Ireland. Grandma was also of a noble family, but she came from the North of Ireland. Grandpa was Catholic and Grandma Protestant. In those days that was a bit of a scandal. But then, Grandpa was just as likely to have married that way out of sheer perversity. That was the way he

was. He was Irish in the generally accepted idea and use of that word. He could be most contrary and cussed in his regal way, and you dared not go against him.

'Handsome' is a mild word to use for him. I can see him in my mind's eye as clearly today as when I first met him all those years ago. He was fairly tall— at least to my eyes—and well built. He had white hair that was tinged with a faint gold. He had clear blue eyes that either looked at you indulgently, or bored right through you. His eyebrows were fair, his forehead wide and high, and his arms were like those of a refined gorilla. He could sweep you up in them with a charming smile, or he could let them hang loose in readiness for a touch of punishment if the eyes above remained unsmiling. That was our Grandpa.

I have not told you about his smell. You could hardly call it 'scent' or 'fragrance', yet after all these years it is as rich and aromatic as in those days. I know now that it must have been a mixture of fine Irish whisky and Central American cigars. His silky moustache had a perpetual stain, and his breath breathed out *auld* Ireland. When he walked into a room, he would bring the aroma with him. Also with it came the most unforgettable laugh a child could hear. His voice was rich, deep-throated and evocative of mystery. When he chuckled, you knew he had command of rare humour, and you strained to understand it all.

The pity of it all was that Grandma had 'passed on'. I was never sure about the place to which she had passed on. I can only remember my mother's

grief at the time. Her passing was a bit of a relief for me, for I had an abhorrence of wrinkled and dried facial skin, which was what Grandma had. Her kindly kisses were a great ordeal to me. I thought of her as entirely aged and was amazed that Mother doted on her, old and all as Grandma was. My mother certainly loved Grandma and was inconsolable at her death. My father was sympathetic, but showed little emotion. He had a thing about the Irish as a race. His Tory blood made him look upon them all as bogtrotters and rebels, although he seemed graciously to have made an exception of his wife and her parents. I think it unedifying to repeat some of the things he said about their countrymen, especially the Catholic Irish.

A little over a year after Grandma's death, Grandpa announced to us his intention of revisiting Ireland. He had run away from that land as a rebel boy. He had argued fiercely with his father and they had angrily parted company. He had come to the fair land in the South to seek his fortune, and a fortune he had made. The grand home in which he ruled told you that, as did the magnificent furniture and the gracious gardens, including, as we must, the tennis court, the fish ponds and the aviaries.

Ah, the aviaries! Even now I think about them with envy. Delicious waves of nostalgia flow over me when I think of the bush-filled cages, the brilliant colours of the captive birds, and their evident delight at being in such surroundings; and with them also that remarkable collection of parrots, including four brilliant Giant Macaws, my victim being the most princely of them. Yes, there were the aviaries, and

the fountains filled with exotic goldfish, every bit as noble as their avian companions.

Grandpa, as I have said, was a successful man. His success had come as something of a shock to his Protestant wife. She was a woman of high moral ideas. She strongly disapproved of gambling. I must admit that much of her view—held as firmly by her daughter, my mother—had rubbed off on me, and when I discovered in later years that Grandpa was a racecourse bookmaker, then I too came in for a bit of a shock. However, that was the way it was with Grandpa, and he was not merely a bookie, but a most successful one. Note, then, the proof of it in that lovely home with its sweeping lawns and wonderful gardens.

Grandpa, then, was going to make a grand return to his own family. He would again stand on his family hearth, having expanded into a prosperous middle-aged man, and although somewhat paunchy, nevertheless a man in the finest health. Doubtless he must have made a great impression upon his folks. I have the distinct memory of letters which gave us a ball-to-ball description of all events from the moment he went on board ship with his youngest daughter at Sydney, until he returned to the same some fourteen months later. It was a great trip, without doubt.

Our family—with its eight children—had to look after Grandpa's place whilst he and his daughter were away. I was scarcely six years of age, but the thrill of it came to me passionately. I knew we had been translated to heaven. To live with all that avian joy and arboreal splendour was to me heaven on earth. My only disappointment was that Grandpa

had fenced off about a third of the property. Old Mister Ellers at the back was to look after the poultry, the fish ponds, and the ridiculous little Yorkshire terrier, Bitsy. I sighed at the loss of these creatures, but consoled myself with the budgies, finches, canaries, and the Giant Macaws. We are now close to the subject of this tale.

The theme, of course, is the Giant Macaw. You probably know it is a parrot which, being the largest in the world, is thus the most impressive. It comes from the South American jungles, and is unusually brilliant in plumage and highly raucous in voice. Its colours are rich, almost metallic, and the blues, reds, greens and oranges are unbelievable even when seen. The birds are of great length, and they must have unusual power. Their beaks are large, but not disproportionate to their well-moulded bodies. Just one of the tail feathers would be a treasure to possess. However, it is the Macaw eyes which are the special feature of the bird. They look at you with gaze that is more than human, no less than aristocratic, and they possess the most natural hauteur of any creature in the world. Moreover, their gaze grips you powerfully, setting up processes of thought that range from the fearful to the worshipful, from the point of bewilderment to that of guilt at being a mere human and not a royal bird. I have seen even strong-minded men quail before their looks, and gentle ladies have melted away from the scene in dismayed embarrassment.

To get down to the practice of the matter: Dadda had his family team organised in no time. Dadda's control of logistics still remains firm in my memory.

Lawns had to be mowed, garden edges to be cut, birds to be cared for, and parrots to be served with fear and trembling. Inside the house there was much to be done. We had always had a maid, for my mother was not domestically equipped at that point of her life. My job was a very humble one. It was to sweep the ash-and-bitumen paths that skirted the tennis court. A boy of six years could handle little more. The path was constantly strewn with the berries from the peppercorn trees that hung over it with gnarled branches and fronded leaves.

Cecil, who was four years older than I, was a smart person. He had some of the qualities exhibited by Grandpa, and these can be classed as resourceful. He would earn money by gathering bottles and hessian sacks, and would hire us out to do his duties. He was a hard worker, but always shied from labour which was imposed upon him. He was strictly of the autonomous class. Giving orders was what he liked, not receiving them. So our Saturday pocket money was augmented by our being hired out for Cecil's purposes and dignity. Cecil himself was in charge of the Giant Macaws. Each Macaw had a huge steel cage, the floor of which was a removable tray. Trays had to be cleaned regularly. The birds had to be fed each day with the finest of grain, which included maize seed, wheat, sunflower seed and millet. The main meal was one which Grandpa had evolved. It was toast and tea made into a substantial cloggy mass. The parrots revelled in this. They seemed to delight in the globules of it which clung to their beaks. Only when they had finished their meal would they rub and scrape their great beaks on the wooden perches.

Over the years, they had worked this timber into an ebony-like blackness and smoothness.

My problem was that I rarely went near the Macaws. They set up such a turmoil within me that I could not handle my day too well if I began it with them. Canaries are gentle, perky creatures. Finches twitch their way through life, and budgies are incessant in their chatter, as also screeching in their flighting. Against these innocent forms of living, Macaws are contemplative in their thinking, judgemental in their decisions and harsh in their utterances. For a highly emotionalised child of six it was all too deep, too grand and too intense. So I kept my distance from the Macaws. It was not that I did not admire them. I did. I was in awe of their limitless majesty, but they were too profound for me. I became dwarfed in their presence.

For this reason, Cecil could never get me to remove the floor trays, nor replenish the water. As for feeding them, that would have been impossible. To open a small door and put my hand into the cage to replace a food receptacle was far from my idea of living a safe existence. Money or no money, I stoutly refused to do it—that is, until Cecil went on holidays.

None of us ever went on holidays. Vacations were not only unknown in our family, but those who took holidays in other families came under withering scorn. We saw them as unnecessary and even as 'sissy'. In our male and Stoic world everything was sissy which was not male and stoical. Cecil had other ideas. Also he had a friend who loved holidays and wanted a companion. My father was a bit stern about the whole thing, but he let Cecil go. Perhaps he

wanted to see what would eventuate. I doubt whether Dadda had ever experienced a holiday. The condition under which Cecil was allowed to go was that his brothers and sisters would look after the Macaws. They agreed, albeit a trifle reluctantly. Cecil grandly gave us threepence each from his personal hoard, and so we accepted the irregularity of the holiday. We would mind the Macaws.

To be honest I cannot remember all the details. The one thing that still stands out was that somehow I had to supply the water. Then it came to pass that I also had to give them the tea and toast. The grain was no problem. It would last for days. They would touch it only when the tea and toast gave out.

SUMMER had come. It had come with hot westerlies— westerlies which rushed vehemently across the Blue Mountains and then through our sedate, upper middle-class suburb. They brooked no class distinction in their passing. They scorched the flower gardens of our Western suburbs, as they did the bush gardens of the Northern district. They were impartial in their action. The inner suburbs sweated too, and sweltered. The outer suburbs sang with the mad harmony of the cicadas. Floury Bakers, Black Princes, Green Mondays and all the rest joined in paeans of eternal joy, which began in the early mornings and went on until well after midnight. Heat and noise were their joy and our bane. Born before the days of refrigerators and airconditioners, we had to bear the spoiling of meat and milk. The ice chests smelled of ammonia as the temperature soared and

the iceblocks melted. The horse carts left the track of their iron tyres in the melting bitumen of the road. Even the asphalt footpaths bubbled. The sun appeared as a sickly yellow through the clouds of smoke from bushfires. Out on hot pitches, Bradman logged up his miraculous scores, whilst even Grimmett knocked over countless wickets. Even that did little to revive the sagging spirits of heat-beleaguered Sydneysiders.

The Macaws remained superbly unaffected. If anything, their regality revelled in the great heat. I had little thought for them. My brothers and sisters being on holidays made life rich for me. In the mornings I would sit on the handlebars of my oldest brother's bike. It was frightening, but it was wonderful. In the afternoons I would find a cool nook in one of the wings of the sprawling house and play with the few toys I possessed. We would visit the kitchen for numerous drinks of water, and late in the afternoon would be off for a penny ice-cream, handing over hot coins for the coveted cones. One a day was like a feast, and Cecil had helped us to three of these feast days.

The morning that I should have changed the parrots' water, I failed to do so. Alas! My mind was on other things, distracted as usual by my vibrant sister, Gloria. Gloria and I were very close. She was eighteen months younger than I. She could invent mischief in a flash. I was slow and dull. Compared to me, she was meteoric. Before I could ponder the mischief, she was in it, and I with her. Take, for example, getting the eggs from Ellers' place. After all, they were Grandpa's hens. We resented not hav-

ing the chooks on our side of the fence. Also we loved chickens. We knew next to nothing about the breeding of poultry, having it fixed firmly in our minds that every egg contained a chicken. Gloria reckoned that we could make it over the fence, into the chook house and back again in no time. Once we had released the chickens from the bondage of their eggshells, we would have our own wee birds. We could then build a chicken yard. Then we could breed more birds.

I was thrilled with her reasoning. However, the whole project took much time. We had to build a ladder with kerosene tins, house bricks, and stones, and it was hefty work for ones so young. When we did get over the fence, we tumbled to the ground. Luckily it was grassed. We then crept around the fish ponds, and made our way into the fowl yard. Had we not known Bitsy, the Yorkshire terrier, we could soon have had old Ellers on our tails. However, Bitsy also enjoyed himself in the fowl yard. The hens, being so used to him, did not even let out a squawk. A broody hen or two defended their eggs, but we picked out eggs in other nests and made our way back to the fence. We had not thought about getting back over the fence, so we had again to commence the work of building something of a ladder. It took time, and the hot weather made us weary.

Finally, when we tumbled to safety, our eggs were broken—all but one, that is. In this one egg lay our hopes for future poultry farming. We tackled it gently, hoping to lift a chip of the shell and view the darling chicken within. It took us an hour before we opened the egg, and we needed a brick to do it. We had not heard of china eggs, or if we had, then we

had not understood. We were dismayed that fowls could lay such hard and empty things. Our whole venture had been dependent upon this one egg, and on that one egg it crashed, especially when old Ellers discovered the homemade ladder and peered down, over the fence, at his one china egg, now in fragments. The old boy loved Grandpa, so he only tut-tutted a half-hearted threat. He watched us make our rapid way up the path to the house.

It was on that journey that I caught the eye of the Giant Macaw, and what I saw sent a shaft of fear into my heart. The old king parrot was staring sightlessly at me. The regal gaze had gone. In its place was a glazed and undirected stare. I felt both sickened and revolted. I also noticed that his wings drooped. They were held a little from his body, but they were held listlessly. Royalty and regality were replaced by a nameless misery. What was more—and so terrifying—was the utter silence of the habitually raucous creature. Whether or not the other Macaws did not dare articulate in the presence of their silent leader, I do not know. The silence on that hot day was truly uncanny.

I felt guilty. In the hot, dry, westerly-swept day, I felt horribly guilty. Yet, it seemed, I had done nothing except of course neglect to fill the water pan. Also I remembered that I had not put in the toast and tea. I felt I ought to do this, but when I went into the kitchen it was gone. I rationalised simply that someone had fed the parrots and that there was no need to worry. At mealtime I felt too sick at heart to eat much. I was glad to get away, but wild horses could not have dragged me to that cage between the pep-

percorn trees. Once, when I had to get a hoe for my oldest brother, Ray, I walked down the path on the other side of the tennis court. I had a fearful glance across at the Giant Macaw's cage, and what I saw made me turn away. The eyes stared at me with fixed gaze. Even from that distance I could read the sightless accusation. Meanwhile, the other Macaws seemed unaffected. One of them was pottering about with his beak in the grain pan.

That night I had a fearful nightmare. Although I had only seen snakes in the Zoo, I saw plenty of them in my dream. These snakes were crawling towards me, and although they never reached me, neither could I flee from them. Even when I awoke, I was sure they were still with me, the scene was so vivid.

I asked Ray to take me with him on his bike. When he had wearied of me, I played under the date palm trees on the front lawn. I hated the local park where a band often played in its rotunda, and where strange children stared at me because I must have seemed different to them. That was the park where I once left a fur coat which I hated. Sadly enough, someone saw me leave it and followed me home. My mother gave him sixpence for his kindness, which made me indignant. My association made me dislike the park, but I went to it that day rather than go near the chief Macaw.

That night Dadda was checking up on his team. 'All the birds in good order?' he asked. Those responsible chorused that the birds were in order. 'The Macaws in good shape?' he asked.

Norman nodded for me. 'They had plenty of grain when I saw them,' he said. I was grateful to him for

his remarks, although inwardly fearful. Sometimes Dadda would walk down and talk to the parrots. If he imitated Grandpa's voice then they answered, which delighted him. I was fearful that he would suddenly wish to talk to the Macaws. Dadda simply said, 'If those parrots fail to get water they will die.'

Norman asked why that should be. Dadda told us all about the Macaws in the South American jungles, where there was plenty of shade and no lack of water. My tongue was dry as it stuck to the roof of my mouth.

'Need plenty of water,' Dadda said.

That night the snakes returned. They crawled towards me with deliberate and deadly slowness. I could feel the slither of them and I went cold. I shuddered myself awake. In the dawn I slipped out of the house. The throb of yesterday's heat was still there, and the cicadas were taking their cue from it. They, too, throbbed and thrummed and strummed, and the noise of them got inside my head. I ached as I crept towards the Macaws.

In the grey dawn I saw that apart from the king Macaw the other birds were in good shape. They were nudging their grain pans. Not the king Macaw. He was motionless on his perch, his head dropped. I hoped he was asleep. When I reached him he was staring downwards. I looked up at him, hoping the eyes had returned to their proud sightfulness. They had not. He looked ghastly. His heavy beak hung forward, and his shoulders were lowered. Even so, his stare met mine. I made a move to open the lower door and get his water dish. His look so terrified me that I could not do this. He was more like a ghost than a

real bird. Anyway, it was the death-look of him that frightened me. When I went to get the water pan, his head moved. I closed the wire door, scarcely waiting to fasten it. I ran sobbing.

Even so, I knew I could not leave him. I found the hose and turned on the tap. I filled the water pan. Then, to placate my untutored conscience, I also filled the water containers in the other cages. I played the spray over the aviaries, and the finches came in a flash. Even the canaries joined in, and the budgies shrieked and chattered so loudly that I thought they would wake the family. I went back and played the hose on the Macaws. They revelled in it, although with the dignity of their pomp and circumstance. Their leader made no stir. The water fell on him, and then off him, and things were as before.

Looking back, I marvel that a six-year-old could have used that hose. Certainly there was no idea of covering up tracks. For days I had given the birds no water, and they had survived. The giant of Giant Macaws, however, had failed to survive. I knew that by instinct, as I dragged my feet back to the house. I knew he was as good as dead.

The day of his death notched up a heat record. Early in the morning the mercury tipped over the hundred. It soared from an extra one to an extra twenty, and then faltered. It made another point or two and stayed at that until the fiery sun went down through the haze of bushfire smoke. At that point in time, the great king of the Macaws was dead. I knew it intuitively that evening. I also knew it for sure the next morning when I went out fearfully into the dawn.

There, on the floor of the cage, was the dead parrot. It had fallen face-forwards, but its head had twisted and was now awry. Dignity had gone. The bird, to my eyes, had diminished in size. Its regality had dissipated. It was a pitiful effigy of its former grandeur. The horrible thing was that the one eye now visible stared upwards and outwards with fixed gaze. I had never seen a dead thing, but intuitively I knew that this was death. This was how it must have been with Grandma, even though she was not a Macaw. I was both awed and terrified. The eye may have been sightless, but it kept speaking to me. Not of course in actual words. I wanted to run but was as helpless as I had been in the nightmare. My feet were fixed to the ground. Inwardly I shook with terror.

It was another day before the family discovered the dead parrot. By this time the ants were in the cage. They had gouged the head around the eyes. They were crawling through the feathers. Dadda made the discovery himself, and he was visibly moved.

‘What will happen to Grandpa?’ he asked Mumma. She shook her head, and I wondered why she looked so troubled.

Dadda was speaking mainly to himself. ‘Grandpa loved that parrot,’ he said. ‘He loved it almost more than anything.’

I thought about that. Somewhere in my mind was the idea that both Grandpa and the king Macaw knew each other and could share their thoughts. They were both quite regal, really. They had the affinity that goes with natural nobility.

Mumma said, 'When Mother died he found solace in that Macaw.' I didn't really know what she was saying. I had never heard the word 'solace'. However, I had a faint idea that Grandpa had needed to have this parrot around the place.

'It might even be worse when he comes back.' Mumma said. 'He might feel even more lonely.'

Norman wanted to know how the parrot had died. To my relief—but also to my increased guilt—Dadda said, 'Oh, from the heat, of course. He must be older than we thought. He had plenty of water. Anything could die in this heat.'

I could have died right there, heat or no heat. I was in a welter of misery. Already I was seeing Grandpa coming home with Aunty Flo, rushing down the gangway and hurrying home to his parrots, thus finding the king Macaw dead, going white with disappointment, and even dying from sorrow. The guilt drew my stomach into a tight ball.

Within a week the travellers were home. There was a great fuss. We took taxis to the wharf, and Grandpa came down the gangway of the ship. Aunty Flo was on one arm and a strange lady on the other. He let go of the two women and scooped my mother up into his arms. He buried her in whisky-and-cigar kisses. He patted Dadda on the back. Then, there on the wharf, he made a wide flourish with his arms, making a half-bow to the lady with Aunty Flo.

'Meet Laura,' he said, with a rich, throaty laugh. 'She's the new lady of the house.'

Mumma stared for a moment, unable to move. Her gaze was fixed on the lady of whom she had heard much but never yet met. It was Grandpa's childhood

sweetheart. Mumma made a move to welcome Aunt Laura but did not succeed. She stopped, frozen with feelings. Dadda moved in for her and welcomed Grandpa's new woman. A hubbub of noise covered the moment. I stood outside it all, my mind working furiously. I suddenly knew that Laura would be a true substitute for the king Macaw, and that Grandpa would not die with sorrow and grief. Yet whilst I was temporarily heartened, my wretched guilt grew until I was dumb with remorse.

There is not much more to tell. Some weeks later Grandpa and Laura were married. Aunty Flo went off to do further nursing training, after which she went to the bush. She left Grandpa and Laura to themselves. Grandpa had asked to see the parrots the moment he reached the house, and we took him to the Giant Macaws. He reacted sharply to the death of his favourite bird, and if Laura had not put her arm around him and looked up into his eyes I think he would have exploded with devastating anger. As it was, he looked greatly annoyed. Dadda told him quietly that the birds had been well looked after.

'It was surely the treat,' he told Grandpa. 'It would have been no wonder if we had lost the lot.'

Grandpa muttered something about Macaws being 'close to immortal', or 'living to a ripe old age', but Laura made loving, supportive gestures that restored Grandpa somewhat, and we then went to see the canaries, which had bred very well.

There is no doubt about it: something had happened to Grandpa. It waited to be seen whether Laura could fill the gap of the two departed—

Grandma and Macaw. I wish I could report a good thing in that regard, but alas, my reportage is a sad one. For the week of the honeymoon and the immediate weeks that followed, Grandpa was happy enough. In that time Laura gradually took over the house. From her point of view, it was natural. Yet Grandpa had developed a domestic routine that was peculiar to him, and even a childhood sweetheart could not get him to alter. He became strangely silent and even morose, which was unusual for this hearty Irishman.

When Laura suggested they let old Ellers keep the back portion with the poultry and fish ponds, he was stunned. Strangely, however, he agreed and gave the whole lot to Ellers for little more than a song. He was adamant about the aviaries. They had to stay. Reluctantly he agreed to change the tennis court into a croquet green. Laura had always played croquet. She now enjoyed her croquet with the new cronies she had made, whilst Grandpa tinkered half-heartedly in some back shed. There was one thing for which he never forgave her, though: that she had asked him to sell the Macaws or to donate them to the Zoo.

‘Jerome,’ she had protested, ‘they are so noisy. They simply screech and screech.’

All of this I heard later. We lived some suburbs away and rarely had the opportunity to visit them. One day we did, and that was when I overheard Grandpa telling the whole story to Mumma and Dadda.

‘The woman’s impossible,’ he grumbled in his rich, throaty voice. ‘She would drive a man to drink.’ that of course puzzled me, because I knew that already

Grandpa drank whisky. Perhaps he meant more whisky, or more whisky than before.

‘If I couldn’t get into Tattersalls from time to time,’ he said, ‘I would go crazy.’ Tattersalls, of course, was the meeting place of all bona fide Australian bookies.

Mumma uttered some comforting words, and Dadda kept nodding in concerted supportive agreement. He had not really approved of having a new mother-in-law, not anyway at his age. Also he had thought it was a bit soon after Grandma’s death. He had never met anyone quite as Irish as Laura, nor as dominating.

For some strange reason, Grandpa attached himself to me. It may well be that I looked somewhat like him, and perhaps he sensed that I had had some unusual encounter with the mystery of life, even at the age of six. Whatever it was, he kept talking to me. Time and again he would revert to the Macaws, and especially his favourite Giant Macaw, whom, incidentally, he called ‘Macaw’ as though he were a man, and a Scot at that.

‘Macaw was a great friend,’ he mused. ‘Miss him like blazes, I do, and all that.’

I can still hear his rich Irish brogue with the musical lilt in it. Even now I tremble with both fear and delight at the very memory.

‘It’s his dying I cannot understand,’ he kept saying. ‘It is just about immortal that they are.’

Before we left, he suddenly dived his hand into a trouser pocket. He jingled some coins and withdrew two of them. They were small, but golden: English sovereigns. ‘For you, Paul, laddie,’ he said.

It was then that guilt got hold of me as never before and never after. I looked at the coins with dismay, and suddenly my voice rose in a wail. My hands went up into the air and my chubby legs shot forward. Almost without knowing it, I was racing up the asphalt path on the side of the lawn where the Giant Macaw had once lived in his steel cage. My voice was crying out, time and again, 'I can't, Grandpa! I can't, Grandpa!' and all the time Grandpa was staring after me, his arm still held forwards and on his hand the two gold coins, shining dully in the sunlight.

They found me up in the park about dusk. Dadda was a bit sharp with his words, but Mumma was deeply loving. Grandpa was searching for me also, but not in the park. We met him back at the house. He didn't try to give me the coins, but he kept looking at me thoughtfully, and it seemed he knew all about the death of the Giant Macaw and my part in it. Never a word, however, did he utter. I ached that he should, but also I feared to have him say something.

Whether he really knew or not I do not rightly know. All I know is that from that day Grandpa was not long for this world. At six years of age you cannot work it all out, but some sixty-five years or so afterwards you can reason that it could have been thus, or so-and-so, but how could you know you were right?

All I can say is that I am glad and relieved to be able to tell the story, even though it is so long afterwards, and to know that although I killed the Giant Macaw I was not a deliberate murderer. I can never be sure that Grandpa died from missing Grandma, as well might have been the case, and I hope it was,

and not from love of a beautiful, brilliant and royal bird captured from a South American jungle. I do know that for years Laura loved her croquet green, and played the game well. She also regretted the departure of Grandpa, for he was a wise and wealthy man. I never did hear what happened to the other Macaws.

For myself, I fancy that Grandpa wanted to go to Grandma and Macaw, and I doubt not that he is there with them both—if that is the true nature of things. What often comes up in my mind and causes me to sigh a trifle is whether Grandpa is more attached to Macaw than to Grandma. On such occasions I think a little and conclude that since Grandpa handled it well enough on earth he will also handle it well enough wherever he may be.

CHARLEY TWISTLE'S WHISTLE

Charley Twistle couldn't whistle;
Charley is too dumb.

He never forgot their little rhyme. In fact, it was a jingle that had always stayed at the back of his mind, even when he had his triumphs and successes.

Charley and the other primary school children used to scuff their way along the red basalt country road. If they walked on the grass at the side of the road they had to avoid the cow pods, so they kept to the dirt. Those were the days when cows wandered everywhere, and no one thought of impounding them. Sometimes they would meet a bull with the straying cows, and the children would duck through the redwood rails of the fence, and walk along in a paddock until they passed the fierce and dangerous beast. Before they went into Ma Parr's little school they would brush off the dust from their shoes with their hands. Ma Parr was a fearsome old lady who could not abide dust on her pupil's shoes, not even in a place as dusty as Warrangumble.

The trouble for Charley, both walking to school and returning home with the others, was that they had whistling competitions. The dreadful fact was

that Charley Carew could not whistle. He had been born that way. Early in life he had had an urge to purse his lips and whistle. He had tunes deep down in him that wanted to be whistled, but his lips were helpless to help him. When he tried to whistle, nothing came forth, not even expiring air.

It was not for want of trying. He would get down behind the hayshed and have a go at it. He made grimaces, he twisted his lips, he extended them, he pursed, but all to no avail. The horrible truth came to him that he was whistleless. A secondary shock which came to him was that he could not make the rude raspberry sound that was common to all other children ever born. In that sense Charley's lips were of not much use to him in a world which could whistle and emit rude sounds.

So, when they trudged their way under the hot Warrangumble sun to Ma Parr's little school, he could not join them in their whistling, and this he felt keenly. He loved the sound of ten children of all sizes and shapes whistling like a happy band of primary pilgrims. But in his case, nary a sound came from his own lips. That was why he lagged behind them just that little.

Cruelly enough, they soon found out.

'Charley,' they would say, 'you never whistle with us.'

'Charley Carew,' they would demand, 'whistle along with us.'

Jenny Chapman, whom Charley knew to be the most beautiful girl in all the world—not just in Warrangumble—was the most insistent of all. It was as though her acceptance of Charley Carew totally

depended upon whether or not he could whistle. No whistle; no relationship.

She would say, with some feminine slyness of persuasion, 'Just whistle for me, Charley,' and Charley would go into the deepest of all misery that a child of seven could know. In his deep pain he even let her take him aside one day, behind a tree, and allowed her to try to teach him whistling. She showed him how she did it, and when it would not work she left him with that trace of impatience she always had for those who could not do what she could.

He was good at talking; he was good at walking; he was good at running, jumping, and leaping high over the vaulting bar at the school sports. He was good at cricket and at football; he was good with his fists; but when it came to whistling he was dumb, just plain dumb. So the other nine children made up the little jingle,

Charley Twistle couldn't whistle;
Charley is too dumb.

Of course, his name wasn't Twistle, but children don't mind little things like that. Seizing on weakness in another is part of child growing and child living. So they would deliberately flaunt their whistling powers before the miserable Charley, and come out with their cursed rhyme. Also they would vary it from time to time, such as,

Charley Twistle, come on, whistle;
Charley, let us hear you!

or,

Charley, Charley eat some barley;
Charley, try to whistle!

There were no end of helpful suggestions like, 'Get the cocky to teach you,' 'Eat more canary seed,' and 'Get among the finches,' but he was not one whit better for such advice.

The strange thing was that Charley could sing well—in fact he had quite a voice—so that when it came to singing in the school or church choirs, or to playing sport, nobody noticed Charley's defects. His sport and singing were—as they say these days—his compensation for a serious disablement. For the most part, then, Charley was a happy person, and his relationship with Jenny Chapman would have been complete but for the fact that he was whistleless.

Being laughed at hurt Charley deeply, but he had a resilient spirit and eventually learned to live without a whistle.

ANYONE knows that on a dairy farm you need to be able to whistle. If you have a red kelpie or a Queensland blue heeler and you cannot whistle it backwards and forwards and around the stock, then you are not much use. On such occasions Charley would have to shout commands, and this became an asset, especially later when they made him a sergeant major in the AIF. Of course, those years were—as yet—far away, and in the meantime Charley had to live with his defect.

He envied Sean, his older brother, who could not only whistle tunes, but could whistle the dogs around the cows, scarcely pursing his lips. Of course, the greatest misery to the young Charles was when Sean put his first two fingers between his front teeth and

gave the long, shrill blast of a whistle that you could hear from Warrangumble to Sydney, some hundreds of miles away. So for Charley, in this matter, it was misery all along the line.

It was this way when they went to sheepdog trials. It was this way when Angeline, his young sister, went about whistling the latest songs from the wireless. She could even master the ‘top of the pops’—as they used to call the session. It was no great compensation that he could sing the same songs very well. He would have given up that ability, just to be able to whistle them. Often—seated on a milkingstool—his head tucked into the side of a cow, and his hands pumping out the creamy milk into a bucket, he would try to whistle. He would wander into the bush amongst the acacias and the banksia, the ti-trees and the eucalypts, but not even in the privacy of them could he whistle.

The day came when he accepted the fact that he was not made the way others are made—that he did not have the gift of whistling. From that point onwards he concentrated on other things—like singing and sport, clever debating, and even writing. In this way his life was going to be happy enough.

At the Tech College his deficiency never showed up. His aunt and uncle, with whom he boarded, were not active whistlers. The local church choir never put on whistling items, nor did the local brass band, in which he played the trombone, use musical whistles, and the players never stopped to do a corporate whistling event. So Charley was relatively safe.

That is, until war broke out. By this time Charley had completed his Tech College course, and even his

apprenticeship, and he was a full-blown electrician. True to their traditions, the Army ignored his trade occupation and put him in the Infantry, so that he was just another footslogger. He didn’t mind that: footslogging can be a merry life.

And so it was, that is, until the day the whole platoon began to whistle. Prior to the whistling they had a gramophone on the back of a utility truck, and the Sigs had attached an amplifier and speaker to it, and so they would march around Centennial Park, Sydney, to the regular beat of ‘Colonel Bogey’ or the ceremonial music of ‘The Duke of Wellington’. All of that delighted the soul of Charley Carew. Even when the ute hit a bump in the road, and the long line of platoons missed a beat, Charley and the rest learned how to change step and get back into line with Colonel Bogey. So they sang,

‘Bovril,’ ‘twas all the band could play,

‘Bovril,’ they sang it night and day,

but this day the loudspeaker crackled and sputtered and then died. Five hundred pairs of feet continued to tramp in step, but the music was gone. Yet only for a moment; suddenly they burst into splendid whistling, and you could hear, through it all, the memorable parody.

Suddenly, Charley Carew was miserable. His mind rushed back to the red basalt road in the district of Warrangumble, and the daily pilgrimage to Ma Parr’s small primary school, and nine others whistling their way in the summer heat, and Jenny Chapman looking at him sideways, to see whether he

could whistle yet, whilst the others were singing— or even whistling—their accursed tune:

Charley Twistle couldn't whistle;
Charley is too dumb.

He kept his head up because he was the leading corporal. He had his .303 rifle with bayonet fixed all at the correct slope, and his arm never trembled. However, his heart did. It trembled more when Harry Hooper, who hated all authority, including corporals (especially corporals), said, 'Too proud to whistle, eh,

Charley hoped his head held high was able to hide its blush under the heavy tan, but Harry Hooper was nothing if not a nagger, and he nagged. Charley's heart felt sick within him. The years fell away and he was just a little boy again, unable to whistle in the dogs, unable to impress Jenny Chapman, and unable to play music with his lips, other than via a trombone.

When they finally marched into the Recruit Training Depot—alias the Royal Sydney Showground— Charley had decided on his plan. When their fierce Colonel-in-Command had passed the troops to the Major who had passed them to the Adjutant who had dismissed them with military precision, Charley waited for what was coming. But then, as we have said, he had a plan.

As anticipated, Harry Hooper was in jeering mode. He announced to the melting group 'A' platoon, 'Our Corporal Charley Carew is a bit too proud to whistle.'

He looked at Charley and asked, 'Ain't that the case?'

There were a few nods from the group, a grunt or two, and then silence.

'Now,' said Harry, and he launched his triumphant salvo, 'it is either that Corp Carew is too proud to whistle, or'—and here he paused, whipping up derision in himself and others against noncommissioned authority—'or,' he repeated, 'our famous Corp *can't whistle!*' The last two words were definitely spoken in startling italics.

There was a roar of laughter, ribald laughter, laughter born of resentment against the rank of a noncommissioned officer. Yet not all joined the laughter. Some of them respected Carew quite a bit, and others knew him to be a competent Physical Training Instructor. So they waited, with interest.

A silence fell over the group. Charley Carew, corporal in charge of 'A' Section of 'A' Platoon, advanced steadily towards Harry Hooper, private and footslogger of the same section and platoon.

'Harry,' he said, with dangerous gentleness, 'I am about to tell you something. It is this: I am not too proud to whistle. You are right—I cannot whistle. Harry, I have never whistled. I have tried time and again since I was born, and I cannot whistle. Also I am incapable of giving a raspberry or I would give you one right now.'

As he was speaking, he was taking off his army tunic which had double stripes on one sleeve.

'Now, Harry,' he went on, 'I know you do not like corporals or anyone in authority, and so you do not like me. I know, Harry, that you will torment me for the rest of our days in the army, so I have a little proposition to put to you.'

He paused and looked Harry in the eye, quite closely.

'Harry,' he said, 'I am going to bash all of that tormenting out of you right now. In fact, I am going to bash the daylight out of you. Take off your tunic and shape up, and if you can beat me, then I'll let you make me the laughing stock of the section. If not, Harry, then shut up! Shut up forever! Put up or shut up!'

There was a murmur of laughing approval. Harry was quite red in the face. He was not removing his tunic. He was standing, looking at the large muscles of his corporal's arms, the muscles of his thorax, and the tight, steely muscles of his abdomen. He knew he had no hope—not in heaven, not on earth, and not in hell. For the first time, some kind of respect for his corporal filtered into his hitherto crass and unthinking mind.

'Now look here, Corp,' he said; 'I was only kidding.'

A ripple of disbelieving laughter ran through the large crowd that had gathered around the two. Harry felt lonely in the centre of the wide circle, and even more lonely because of the close presence of Charley Carew.

'It was just a bit of a joke,' he said lamely.

Again the vocal disbelief of the men.

Then Harry nodded. 'Sorry, Corp,' he said. 'I apologise.'

If anything, Charley felt disappointment, but it was surmounted by a thrilling sense of triumph. Not just triumph over Harry Hooper, but triumph over the whistling band of taunters who had walked the red basalt road of Warrangumble, and who had sung

their senseless ditties. Suddenly none of that mattered, and some stuff that had lain in the unconscious mind of the country boy was lifted forever.

'That's OK, Harry,' he said, and put out his hand.

Harry wrung it fervently. 'You'll never hear another word out of me again, Corp,' he promised, with sincerity.

The crowd moved away, grinning and laughing, and Charley joined them in the mess hall, and as he ate he thought that army stew and rice had never tasted so good, and the hot, thick tea had never been so victory-sweet.

GOOD as is all that story, there is even better to come, just as Browning's Rabbi teen Ezra had once said: 'The best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made.'

That best was a long time coming. Charley fought in his war with honour and a decoration or two. His mind never missed a beat when the troops whistled victory and he could not. Even when the returned men marched up George Street, Sydney, and broke into whistling 'Colonel Bogey', he did not flicker an eyelid. He wore the insignia of a Warrant Officer and was proud of it, and when the battalion demobbed he accepted the affection his men had for him. After that, he went in search of Jenny Chapman.

It was not as though he had to search far. He had kept up correspondence with her over the years of college and the war, and he and she had not looked elsewhere. So it was a sweet matter of getting engaged for a few weeks, and then marrying, and of

graduating to Warrangumble, where Charley had been granted a good block of land under the Soldiers' Settlement Scheme. It was a block not far from the old homesteads of the Carews and the Chapmans, and so they were amongst friends.

Farming went well, of course, and children came, one after another, in reasonable spacing of time. Of course, Charley felt pangs when they began whistling and he could not join them. Charley's sergeant major's voice brought the dogs to heel or sent them around the mob, but never a whistle came from the lips of the children's father. Naturally enough, they asked him why he didn't whistle, and cheerfully he explained it to their wondering ears, and, being fond of Jenny and Charley, they accepted it in a natural way. So that was that. His eldest son, Evan, tried to do what his mother, Jenny, had tried to do years before, but it was all to no point: Charley simply could not be taught to whistle.

The children grew. They never trudged the red basalt road and got dust on their shoes, as Ma Parr's little school had been demolished, making way for a bigger and better campus. Then the Area School was built, and in no time the children had migrated to the city to do University or College studies, and Jenny and Charley were left on their own.

They had plenty to do, what with Jenny's embroidery, and the tapestry she was doing, and the preserving of the fruit, and the deep-freezing of the surplus vegetables. Charley had plenty to do with the farm, and the local RSL, and his playing of the trombone in the Warrangumble Band. He had closed down the dairy, as all that was a bit too much for his age, and

so he ran fat stock on his good pastures and did well out of their beef. He had good cattle dogs to help him when he needed to round up calves for branding or stock for the markets.

On the whole, he had a full and peaceful life, though there was one exception, and that was the matter of his mouth. One by one, his teeth had to be extracted. The dentist tried to maintain his last dozen or so, by dint of much drilling and many fillings, but eventually they had to go—all of them. This was a matter of great sorrow to Charley, but he had to submit.

He also had to submit to wearing full dentures, and these greatly disappointed him. He could not feel—as formerly—the full savour of food as it caressed his tastebuds. His dentures lessened his relishing of food, and they were often the cause of pain; but his orthodontist was a patient and kindly man, and finally Charley settled into a new set of teeth, and accepted them as part of the oncoming of old age.

THEN it happened. The fat-stock herd was away at the end of the eighty-acre paddock, and he was in no mood to saddle his stockhorse, or even get out his trail bike; so he stood there, a little peeved, a bit frustrated, and altogether weary. He called the three cattle dogs and gave them orders.

'Go, Bluey! Bring 'em in, Remus! Round 'em up, Queensland!'

The dogs were alert enough. Their eyes could see the stock a long distance away, but their eyes were puzzled. Their pink tongues lolled, their tails wagged,

but they had their heads on one side, pondering the unusual order. They wondered why their master was not mounted and going with them. Charley—that master—was browed if he was going to go with them. Let them do it on their own! He was so pent-up that he exploded his feelings: he whistled.

Without any warning he whistled. He was shocked to hear his mouth given vent to a whistle. He whistled again. The first time it may have been imperfect, but not the second. It came out as complete. The dogs were caught between surprised staring and conditioned obedience. They shot off, racing towards the lower end of the eighty-acre paddock. Charley couldn't stop himself. He kept whistling them, on and on.

Somewhere out of his gut the whistle had gotten free. It had been with him since he was born, but it had never had opportunity to exit itself. Jenny had never been able to teach him; his son Evan had never been able to teach him. No one had been able to do so, but here he was, whistling!

Suddenly understanding came to him. It was his new dentures, now snugly fitted to his gums, which had changed his acoustics, altered his utterance, given him vocalisation.

Jenny had come out on to the verandah, stirred by the strange whistling. What visitor had arrived, and who was this stranger? She did not know. There in front of her—but thirty yards away—was her husband, Charley Carew, alias Charley Twistle, *and he was whistling!* She shivered with joy and wonderment, and her sixty-year-old legs took off with a rush, and she was flying towards him, her arms outspread.

To her unbelieving eyes he put his two first fingers

in his mouth and let out the shrillest of all whistles, one which could be heard from Warrangumble to Sydney City, so many miles away.

Undeterred, she rushed into his arms, and they both held each other, hugging and hugging and laughing all the time—silly laughter for a silly matter; but, in it all, laying to rest forever the ghost of Charley Twistle.

Meanwhile, the dogs were rounding up the fat Hereford beeves on four legs and bringing them at a slow, swinging trot towards the man who was commanding them.

THE EAGLE AND THE WOMAN

THE EAGLE was only a pin-spot in the high sky of cloudless blue. At that point he loved to circle. It seemed pointless for him to wheel and float so high in the heaven, for there would be little, it seemed, that he could see at such height. Yet only the eagle—or another eagle—would know that. His keen eye missed no movement below him. He could see the flutter of birds in the tall jungle pines, and no less the movements of animals and humans along the narrow trails of the high hills. Those hills rose to nigh on ten thousand feet, but he soared far beyond them.

One sight caught in this eye, but his wings never wavered. He floated the entire circle, his gaze still capturing the woman far below. In her arms was a small child. The eagle knew it to be a new child because it was so tiny. His wings turned with his body, then arched themselves slightly so that he could make some descent. This he did. Had anyone been staring upwards, he would have seen the pin-spot of golden brown enlarge, becoming recognisable as the regal bird of the Himalayan hills.

Down below, there was the man. He, of all the others—the chattering, laughing, gossiping men,

women and children—was looking at the eagle. In some way he correlated to the high, flying creature. He had a spirit in him which soared above the mundane and the mediocre. Also he had long, keen sight which saw beyond where most men saw. He saw into other men, and then through them to beyond them. There were some who feared that look and others who were—strangely enough—comforted by it. It was to them the sign and seal that Man is not limited to the three dimensions of his locale, nor to the five senses which seem to bind him. When a man looked as this man did, then there was a stir of excitement in some who watched him. They could say to themselves, 'There is something beyond the horizons of our being!'

He saw the eagle enlarge and descend. He saw it reach a plane where it paused. For moments it stayed as though transfixed. He could detect no flutter of the wings; only an effortless poising. He knew it was gazing down to the hills below it. What it was seeing he did not know, but he felt the faint thrill of the hunter as he empathised with the suspended creature. Then he saw its wings flutter, although the movement was ever so faint, ever so delicate. He knew that its gazing was seeking out its prey, and he wondered what creature had caught the vigilant eye.

THE woman moved towards the bassinette. She was a woman through and through. She had always felt this way. Her husband was her man, and there was none other. Her babe-in-arms was the sixth and, she knew, the last. The others had lived, filling out her

warm maternity. She moved with confidence, the soft flesh cradled in her arms. Then she laid it in the bassinette. She paused for a moment, filling her own eyes with the wonder of pink flesh, and its slumbering serenity. After that she placed the soft mosquito netting over the bassinette. One end of the large basket was partly covered, protecting the child from the sun.

She loved this part of the Indian subcontinent, the mountains' end, dipping as it did towards the blue hills of Kashmir, rising as it did above the plains of the Punjab. It all seemed so ancient, so rich with history, so complete in its gentle mystery. She was glad this child would taste something of its mystery so that it too would be enriched. What did not enamour her was the idle chatter of her fellow countrywomen and those other expatriates of lands she had not yet visited. Their voices were crisp enough in the high mountain air, but she was a woman who, like her husband, was impatient of meaningless formalities, uninterested in small talk. Her womanliness was sufficient for her.

The family played against the dry stone of a naked escarpment. For some reason the bare stone seemed to fascinate them. Perhaps it reminded them of the dry land from which they had come. Here, on the high hills, everything else was green: the tall cypresses, the deodars, and the darkling pines. They all had their characteristic smells, but the smells flowed, combined, and became one. In the years ahead, when they had left this land, they would return in a flash— within the mind—whenever a smell, evocative of this place, would stir them.

Another thing they would always remember would be the lion. Last winter they had heard the lion. It had come at the time of the snow. High had been the falls of the snow, blotting out every landmark, and bringing a fresh, quiet world of gentle white, brilliant only when the sun broke through. Then they had looked down towards the winter conifers, wondering whether the lion would emerge.

At night they heard its roaring. They had read of lions, seen them in movies. A lion to them had seemed real enough, but now they knew that nothing is real until you hear it, and know it is about. Their pulses raced as they ate at table and heard its half-roar, half-guttural articulation. It was so near, even outside the building. They had locked the doors, but the doors were mainly made of glass. Perhaps a lion could break through locked doors of glass. So they thrilled with fright and delight. It drew them closer as a family. Then the winter ended, and with it the visiting lion. The men who had guns went away, and their father emptied his rifle of its rounds. The excitement died.

Now the excitement was again in the air. It was there in the form of an eagle, but no one thought about the eagle. Toilet paper had been in short supply on the hills this summer. People talked about toilet paper. Toilet paper was a great subject. They also talked about the fifty-percent water addition to the milk. They chattered about the lack of cream in the buffalo milk. They talked about the fruit-wallahs who brought the summer fruit from the plains: enormous

mangoes, and the ubiquitous am, the poor man's fruit—the tropical guava; the sweet green bananas from the Sindh, and the tasteless golden bananas from the Punjab; also the fruits from the hills around Quetta, where apricots flourished, and in the right season, apples and pears. Plums, too, were plentiful.

So there was plenty to talk about. There was the food, and the servants, especially the cooks who bought in the markets and overcharged their sahibs and the memsahibas. Married couples shared among themselves how they had thwarted thieving servants and sent them packing. Others shared the fright they had experienced coming up on the overcrowded buses, careering around sharp bends and looking down into the deep valleys below. There was much to talk about, but the eagle was not even an incident to them. They rarely looked up. Generally they looked down to where human things were happening.

THE woman looked up. She saw the eagle, considered it, and then went on her way. She had five other children to feed, and, of course, her man. She thought about the smelly and troublesome kerosene cooking stove. Her mind was mainly on that when she looked up again and saw her man gazing down at her. He waved in a friendly, intimate manner. Then he pointed to the sky. At that gesture, she also looked into the sky. There, again, she saw the eagle. It seemed suspended for a few moments, but with almost imperceptible movements of its wings it faintly fluttered aloft. She smiled at it, and then at her husband. He smiled back. Then he fixed his gaze on the eagle

whilst she went towards the house. Her mind was intent on the meal she would cook.

The man kept gazing. His eyes were hungry for the beauty of the bird. He loved its powerful body, its muscled wings, even the strong talons. What he admired most of all was the regal head, the deep-set but gleaming eyes, and aquiline stance of its sweeping head and beak. He had not only seen such birds in zoos and parks, but in his own land he had climbed high mountains to seek out the eyries of these great eagles. He had seen them in their lairs—grim, still, silent and regnant—and he had never ceased to marvel at the truth of their being, their unique identity, and their authentic regality.

So he kept gazing, and gradually the great feathered creature circled lower and lower. Suddenly, without a fraction of hesitation, it plunged towards the two houses where the people were. They looked up, startled. Their chattering ceased. The children stopped their playing, their high cries stilled. Instead, there was the sudden, squealing cry of the eagle as it swooped over the bassinette, its long talons barely clearing it. Time and people and all things froze.

The woman knew, even before the man. She had almost reached the door of the house, passing the talking people, but making no comment. She seemed not to have seen their fine china, and the Eastern cakes and biscuits piled high in tiers, giving choice to the socialites as they pattered about their lives, intent on tea and coffee, and letting the business of life pass them by. Some were on holiday, some were studying language in the coolness of hills. Their

teachers had been sitting back languidly, rather despising the foreigners, but with a quick eye to take advantage of a perk or two in the midst of the work they were doing.

Nobody moved but the woman. The man watched her suddenly wheel and go plunging towards the bassinette. High in the sky the eagle had risen, and now was poised. So was the man. The struggle was uninvited within him. It had come before he was aware of it. One part of his person was still gripped with immense admiration for the bird of prey. The other was the father part, and also the husband part. Every muscle within him tightened, and suddenly he was catapulted down the hill, rushing towards the woman and the baby. In the same moment the eagle plummeted, as though hurling itself in a single-minded direction towards the bassinette. It arrived only a fraction of a second after the woman.

As the man ran, the action and event before him was as though filmed, and he was watching it in slow motion. He could see the bird dropping, wings arched high, talons forward, its whole body rushing in perfect direction, centred on the bassinette and the new baby within it. The film also showed his woman, rich and motherly in body, taut and strong, her voice rising in indignant rebuke to the great bird above her. There was nothing of despair in the cry. She was not a fearful, hopeless person. She was in command; let no eagle defy her! Her shrill cry split the air. So did her two fine arms. Upward they went as she slewed backwards, turning to face the eagle even as her heels dug into the grass and soil. Her whole being was intent on protection of her babe.

The man caught the glint in the eyes of the eagle. His own strong cry rose with his running. Together their cries would defeat the royal eagle, descending like some brown and feathered archangel. The man's arms were high too, as he ran, and in a flash he was there, almost as his wife had arrived.

THE eagle had seen the child in the bassinette long before he first wheeled in the sky. He had angled to make his swoop and to determine that no enemy was near, certainly none with a gun. He may have felt contempt for the cake-eating, tea-drinking multitude; but for the woman, and then for the man, he had had no contempt. He was one with them. It was not that he felt for them—their fear and their anger—but he felt one with them in their inherent nobility of being.

Even so, he wanted to struggle with them for their loved object. He wanted to confront and be confronted. His whole being swooped and turned and plunged to reach his object before they arrived. Even as his shrill, proud scream hit the air, he knew he would not win. He, too, was a stranger to despair. In him was not an ounce of fear or of dread. He exulted in the swiftness of the plunge, the instinctive drive towards the babe in the bassinette. Then came the undeniable confrontation, the queenly woman suddenly larger and stronger than ever humans had seen her, and now, the very admiration of the bird itself.

The man was a yard from the bassinette, far enough away to study in that slow motion film being screened before him the magnificence of his woman.

Every part of her was strong and vibrant with protective love. An eagle of sorts herself, she anticipated the moves of the flashing bird. She cried out from her depths against its invasion. She poured all her moral rights into one great and terrible cry: 'No!' The man could scarcely contain his passion of pride and admiration. 'No!' he shouted with her, and ran the extra yard.

The bird had swooped, but it had failed. It had sent out its talons which barely missed the woman but wholly missed the bassinette. It had given its second scream, a response to that of the woman and the man. Then it had shot away, drawing on some strange power to loft it upwards in a flash. It rushed and towered into the sky, its wings working rapidly. Then it was on high, poised as though to swoop again.

The woman looked up. Her arms were waving. She was shouting to the bird, expecting it to hear her. The man was shouting too, but to the woman. He scarcely had an eye for the invading creature. His eyes were warmly on his woman, glowing with admiration.

'Oh, boy,' he cried earnestly, 'you sure scared him!' Laughter began to flow from him.

She was laughing and weeping at the same time, and then she caught up her baby from the bassinette. She was about to run with it to the protection of the house, but the man caught her at the waist.

'Don't go,' he said, and was still laughing, the pride trickling out through his laughter. 'Look up!' he commanded her, and at his insistence she looked up. There was the eagle, moving upwards, until it reached the pinnacle it desired. Now it was poised, suspended, but its wings fluttering.

They watched for a moment. Then the man said, 'It knows!' and the laughter was still in his voice. She was not puzzled by his laughter. She knew he was proud of her. She sensed that in some way, though not the way of cruelty, he was more sorry for the eagle than for her, and proud laughter began to grow within her. They both smiled, and she put out one hand whilst her other arm cradled her baby.

'Magnificent bird!' he muttered, and part of her agreed with him. Suddenly she realised she had loved the battle. He had loved the battle. Indeed, so had the eagle. Somehow this was what life was all about. So she smiled again. He smiled also.

They stood there, he loving his wife as never before, and holding in his heart an admiration for the great creature up there in the sky. He could have sworn that as the bird flew off it gave a great salute with its wings. That, of course, could have been the imagination of the man, but both he and the woman knew that the bird would not return. It would leave them with the child. They knew that as well as did the eagle. They found now that they loved the child fiercely as they had not loved it before.

Even so, hand in hand they watched the eagle as it lofted higher and higher until it was a pin-spot, and then no more. Even when the cries of the children broke out afresh and the amazed chattering of the humans on the hill began anew, they did not take their gaze from the blue eyrie of the sky. They kept staring. Only when the pinpoint had vanished completely did they turn and go towards the house and the other children.

PLUM RIGHT

THE FIVE boys walked sedately down the red gravel drive. It was a quiet, respectable, suburban drive. It was not the front drive to the house, but the rear drive. In fact, it was the tradesmen's entrance, and the gate had a notice on it to that effect.

The way the boys walked was, to say the least, suspicious. They walked sedately, but that was forced. Actually they were very cautious. In addition, their eyes were widely open. They were looking to the left, and then to the right, and then they saw what they had been seeking. Two trees laden with blood plums were almost hidden by a few tall shrubs, but without doubt the plums were there. They remembered them from last year, when they had made a good haul. It was in the same Christmas holidays.

The boys were in their early teens. Because the day was hot and somewhat steamy, they wore only loose sports shirts, short trousers, and open sandals. They were fine enough to look at, loose-limbed, and typical suburban boys, out for their holiday lark. They were, in fact, robbing fruit from a suburban home garden.

They began to fill their shirts, plucking away with fear, although on the surface they were all bravado.

They were so hurried in their picking that they failed to be selective. At least, four of them were hasty in their plucking. The fifth boy looked like a bit of a dreamer, but he was in no haste. He selected each plum, knowing that those which were slightly green would be a dead loss. No one would eat them, later. So he chose thoughtfully.

Up in the tall blackbutt gums a couple of currawongs rang their bells, the notes flowing across the tops of the trees, and falling down to where the boys were plucking the fruit. The boys did not hear the currawongs' songs, that is to say, the four boys who were plucking in haste. The fifth boy had a trancelike look. He loved the cries, the mellow cries of the currawongs. They reminded him of stormy days to come, when the rain would be falling through the tall gums, and all the shrubs would be silvered with wetness and sun. So he ruminated as he plucked the plums. He noticed the white powdery surface, and the dull redness of the fruit beneath.

He thought, 'We ought to have left these for a few days. Then they would be fully ripe. Blood plums are delicious when they are wholly ripe.'

He had another thought. 'When they are ripe, the fruit fly grubs are fully hatched and matured. Perhaps this stage is best.'

He continued plucking. The others were in a state of near panic. They were imagining all sorts of things, such as someone watching them through the shrubbery, or footsteps on the gravel. Their guilt was at a pretty high level. When they came to think of it, their parents would be shocked. In fact, they were a little shocked themselves. They looked towards the fifth

boy, and were uneasy at his *sangfroid*, his absolute calm, his deliberate carelessness. They had not completely filled their shirts, so they piled in more of the unselected fruit.

They had robbed other orchards. They had been to Redman's orchard. In a way, you were not blooded fully until you had pinched from Redman's orchard. It was, so to speak, the test orchard for all the local boys in their teens. It had a high fence. It was supposed to have hidden guns that fired saltpetre at you if you kicked a trip-wire. Great stories were told about those trip-wires and saltpetre guns, but then they had not actually met anyone who had heard a gun detonate, or who had felt the painful sting of saltpetre.

It was different here. Redman's orchard was a commercial affair. This was a private home. They, too, lived in private homes. In fact, they also had fruit trees in their backyards, and watched that no one got to them. So they were uneasy as they took the fruit. They consoled themselves that it was only for fun. Mind you, they would enjoy the fruit. They knew the old adage about the taste of stolen fruit. Not that they fully believed it. Each one wished heartily that he were out of the garden, but none was game enough to test out the thinking of his friend. None was prepared to betray the age-old tradition of youthful fruit-pinchers.

What they had always dreaded was suddenly— well, almost—come upon them. A lady appeared around the drive. She stood some distance away, looking at them. Then she came towards them, graciously, but with quickened step.

There was only one thing to do. With looks of fear and despair they fled.

They fled down the red drive, their sandals scattering the gravel as they went. With the hastened running, the going up and down of their heads, knees and chests, the fruit also began to move about in their shirts, and here and there one popped out and rolled onto the gravel. Holding their burdens to themselves, they ran like four pregnant women in flight. They reached the driveway, turned to the right and raced down the road, away from close danger.

The lady they had seen did not pursue them. Instead she stopped at the two blood plum trees. The fifth boy, totally unaware of what was happening, was thoughtfully selecting the maturest fruit he could find. He was not at all hasty. Nevertheless, he noticed that he had collected almost all his shirt could hold. He was about to move to the second tree when he became aware of the presence of a strange person.

This sense of a stranger being present dawned slowly upon him. He was still wrapped in thought, but realised two things. The first was that his companions had left him, and evidently in haste. The second was that the lady was standing very still and was quietly observing him.

He felt, after a time, that he must meet her gaze, so he turned and looked at her fully. He observed that she was a beautiful person. She was groomed and gracious. She was a mature person, but not aged. She was young, yet motherly. He decided he liked her quiet grey eyes, her light brown hair, her balanced features, and her extreme thoughtfulness. At the

same moment he realised that his shirt was bulging out with the plums, and that he had filched these from her trees. He was about to say something.

'Bravo!' she said. The word 'bravo!' was one he had only read, and had never heard uttered.

'Oh?' he said politely.

She smiled a gentle smile at him. 'Congratulations,' she said.

He waited, knowing she was about to impart more information. She repeated the word: 'Congratulations.'

He wondered how this could possibly be. Caution told him to say nothing, so he remained silent.

There was slight indignation in her voice, and more than mild reproach. 'Those cowards!' she said forcefully, and with some warmth. 'Cowards for running away and not facing the music.'

Loyalty to his friends forbad him to nod in agreement. She went on.

'What a fine boy you are, to stay and face the music!'

He decided the music was not too bad. He even liked it. He had, in a way, fallen in love with this woman. She was very motherly. He wished, suddenly, that he had no plums in his shirt.

She seemed a little angry. 'Take those plums out of your shirt! Empty them out!' She made sure he emptied them under the first plum tree.

There was a trifle of contempt in her voice, and some scorn in her eyes. 'Fancy you eating plums like that!' she exclaimed.

He tried to look penitent. Indeed, he *felt* penitent. She was so much alive with her scorn and contempt that her looks, even, were improved.

'I'm disappointed in those boys,' she said, returning to her indignation. Then she smiled, and for him the sun was shining fully. 'I'm proud of you,' she said, 'staying and facing the music.'

He tried to feel guilty, but all he could feel was the flow of her approval. He simply basked in it. His only regret was that he had lost his carefully selected plums.

'NOW YOU must come with me,' she said.

Ah, he knew it had been too good, too good to be true. She was taking him to the house. She would ring his parents, or even, perhaps, the police. He realised that behind her gracious words there must have been indignation and the intention to punish him. He sighed softly with disappointment. She was walking ahead of him and missed this.

On the other side of the shrubs was a small orchard. It was beautiful, the trees standing amidst grass that was green and knee-high. The trees which immediately caught the boy's eyes were two beautiful plum trees, one laden with golden plums, the other with rich purple fruit. His mouth watered, and regret filled his gaze.

'Now,' his companion cried happily, 'I will reward you.'

To his amazement, she directed him to the two trees. 'Pick just what you like,' she said. In a moment she had whisked off, and in another moment she had returned with a hessian sugar bag in her hand. 'Fill this,' she commanded.

Dazed, he began to fill it. There was no question of careful selection. Each plum was ripe to fullness. He laid them carefully in the sack so that they did

not break in falling. He felt the cool softness of them against his fingers, the delightfully silken smoothness of their skins. He could imagine his teeth sinking into them.

While he plucked carefully, she talked. 'I admire a boy who has courage,' she said. 'I despise cowards. That is why I am giving you this reward.'

He ought to have felt like a hypocrite. Instead he was feeling an immense delight. It was a joy welling up in him, and then overflowing all about him. It was like the sunshine which was dappling the trees, or the liquid music of the currawongs, high up in their blackbutts. He noticed with pleasure the Blue Swallowtail butterflies which flitted past, and their fellow creatures, the Large Orange Wanderers, floating with serenity and majesty. Life to him, in that memorable moment, was very beautiful. Most beautiful of all was the gracious woman who filled his heart to overflowing, and his sugar sack to the capacity of his carrying.

'Ma'am,' he said humbly, 'I don't think I could carry more.'

She nodded, appreciating that. She had been regarding him for some time, thinking how quiet, calm, and mature he looked. She decided that he would make a very fine son. With a certain wistfulness she thought it would be impossible, so she simply smiled and walked down the red driveway with him.

He did not really know how to leave. In fact, he did not want the dreamy time to end. So he stood, thoughtfully. She realised his problem, and came across to him. She bent down, and spoke into his ear with a whisper. There was also the trace of her lips

across his ear, and, as he realised what she had said, he nodded, and lifted his hand in a grateful salute. She watched him as he turned right and walked down the road. Then she went inside, into the house itself.

At the second corner they appeared—the four boys. They were filled with excuses. 'Gee, Goddie, we're sorry. Honest, we thought you knew she was coming. We just beat it. Goddie, what did she do to you?'

The questions tumbled out of them. Goddie stood silently, not quite out of his recent and pleasant dream.

Then he said, 'She did nothing.'

'Nothing?' they said, astounded.

He nodded. 'Nothing at all,' he said briefly.

He looked down at his sugar sack. It was then they noticed what he was carrying.

'What's in there?' they asked.

'Plums,' he said dreamily. 'Nice large yellow Wicksons, and big purple Narrabeens.' He smiled at them gleefully. He licked his lips and said, 'Yum! Yum!'

'Yum! Yum!' they chorused in reply. 'Oh, boy, you must have got her in!'

'No,' he said definitely, 'I didn't get her in. I did nothing.' He told his round-eyed audience what had happened, and they fell silent.

Then they looked joyfully and hungrily at the sugar sack. 'Are we going to share them, Goddie?' they asked.

'But you have plenty of your own,' he said, surprised.

'Ah,' they said sadly and truthfully, 'they were nearly all green. You could only eat a few of them.'

He nodded, for he had known that.

‘A pity,’ he said sadly. When they looked at him, puzzled, he said evenly, ‘You see, the lady made me promise I would not give you even one plum. She said you were just cowards, running away like that. If you had stayed she would have given you fruit also. So I promised I would give none to the cowards.’

They stared at him, unbelievably. They were about to give vent to howls, but he stopped them with a raised hand. ‘It’s punishment,’ he said solemnly. ‘You just have to accept the fact.’

He thought he might dramatise the moment by taking out a Wickson or a Narrabeen and eating it before them, but then decided that perhaps that was unwise. Quietly, thoughtfully, he lifted the sack, swung it ever so gently over his back, and began to walk towards home.

THE PRESERVATION OF WALTER FINNIG

This is a story about the lost Mr Finnig. His full name was Walter Charles Finnig, and you could see his photograph in any police station in Australia. His features were not prepossessing. He looked to be just a mild man. His profile was certainly mild enough, having no memorable element, whilst face-on his features were that of a fairly indeterminate person. He was partially bald, with some hair hanging forwards across the left side of the forehead. You could imagine him from time to time passing a hand over the forehead, brushing back the fallen locks. His eyes were clear enough, but they lacked ambition. In other words, Walter Finnig had a face which, once you had seen it, you would forget it. If you had known Walter in the flesh, you would remember the peculiar nervous tic which puckered his features, but even the tic was not very definite. Nothing was all that definite about Walter.

There was quite a to-do when Walter disappeared. Marcia Mary Finnig was a busy woman, as we shall see, and so did not seem to realise for some days that Wally, her devoted husband, had absented himself from their busy little farm. What she thought had

happened, I cannot quite imagine. Perhaps she may have thought he had gone on a fruit-collecting jaunt down Taree way, or even out into the Hunter Valley — he with his old ute and all that! Perhaps that is why she did not report the matter to the police. In any case, she was busy finishing off the bottling of the apricots and plums from their own trees. It was only when she had done that that she looked around for her Wally, and there was no Wally to be found.

The story is quite proverbial here in Wirril Creek. For a few years now, people have talked about ‘tine lost Wally Finnig’, and have given their opinion that one day he would turn up in the district. For that reason they were against Marcia Finnig leaving the old farm and not returning. It was also a bit of a scandal when Marcia married the second time after the statutory seven years had passed and there was no sign of the lost Walter.

As for myself, my writer’s mind was greatly fired. I had written half a dozen stories about Wally F. In one, I had made him lose his memory, and as a result Wally was drifting around the country, trying to puzzle his way back to the identity he had once had. In another, I imagined Walter having run off with another woman, a young, intelligent person who greatly admired the serenity and compassion which were hallmarks of this almost middle-aged man. Yet somehow these explanations did not ring true with me. Walter always seemed too mild for any great passion—a man of simple and unswerving devotion. I was greatly intrigued by his disappearance, and the fact that he had gone without the trace of a clue. Just vanished into thin air had Walter Charles Finnig,

and that was that!

When, therefore, the discovery concerning Walter was made, the whole district blazed into astonished life. No one had ever dreamed that such a thing could have happened. To have suddenly traced Walter, and to have been—so to speak—blatantly confronted by the man himself was beyond comprehension. The whole community was shocked; as well they might have been.

Wally Finnig was not a person who had been born in the district. True, he had lived in Wirril Creek for twenty-five of his thirty-five years, and that almost qualified him as a bona fide resident, but not having been born there, he was looked upon as one who had come from outside. Nevertheless, people accepted him. They liked the mild nature of his calm person. Walter had worked around the district on different farms. He had helped various farmers by using his one and only possession—a tractor. He would plough, cultivate, harrow, and sow seed with the different implements he drew behind the tractor. When the carrots, beans and peas were ready, he was there to dig or pick them; likewise with the potatoes. Anyone who was new could refer to him for the best times of ploughing and sowing. In that sense, Wally was quite an asset to the district.

It was not wholly true to say that Walter Charles Finnig was a bland man. At times you would see a light in his blue eyes, and from that you would know he was deeply interested in some matter or thing. Normally his eyes were calm, and that was when you would think he was bland. They really shone when he first met Marcia Mary Tracey. She had come to

visit her uncle, whom she had not seen for many years. He, poor man, was a bit of a recluse, and could scarcely handle her coming. 'Uncle Arthur', she kept calling him, but he could not help regarding her as a bit of a foreigner, for she came from down near Newcastle, and Arthur Tracey had never moved outside the district. She mollified his bewilderment somewhat by tidying up the house, mending his tattered garments, and cooking him unaccustomed meals. He was deeply grateful for all this, although he could not communicate his feelings.

Wally Finnig had drifted in one day, wondering whether Arthur wanted the back paddock ploughed again for the annual carrot crop. Arthur had wanted that, but he noticed Wally's jaw had dropped, and following the line of vision saw that Walter was centring on Marcia. In a way, that pleased him. It also pleased Marcia. She took immediately to Wally Finnig. She insisted on coming to his bachelor's quarters on the fifty-acre plot of land which he had acquired some years back. There she also did a bit of tidying, patching of clothes, and the cooking of an occasional meal.

In time, the inevitable happened. Wally and Marcia were united in the bonds of Holy Matrimony, the Reverend Bill Williams joining them together, and all Wirril Creek present to see their union. The reception was held in the Wirril Creek Hall, and although Wally had no relatives present, Marcia and Arthur managed to find plenty of theirs. They came from all directions, especially from Newcastle and Raymond Terrace, so that the wedding was a bona fide one, and Wally and Marcia were definitively man

and wife. They surprised everyone by buying Harold Smith's old farm, back near the mountain. Many wondered where the money had come from, but then they surmised that Wally had accumulated a bit, and that Arthur Tracey had helped in his small way. Mostly, however, it must have come from Marcia, and in that surmise they were probably correct.

It is here that my real story begins. The two Finnigs had decided that a honeymoon away from Wirril Creek was a dispensable luxury. What better place, anyway, for a newly married couple, than the Smiths' old property? It was a proper farm, having good outbuildings, a dairy with cream-house, and a reasonable sort of piggery. Best of all—at least in Marcia's eyes—it had a good orchard. The orchard was the thing which led to Wally's disappearance, although it was not until later that we realised this fact. The orchard had all that the old pioneers of the New South Wales North Coast had desired.

Old-time orchards are a study in themselves, but I will not go into that subject here. This orchard was rich with its variety of fruits. There were trees: apple, pear, plum, peach, nectarine and apricot. Also there were trees citrus: orange, mandarin and lemon. Above and beyond all these were the persimmon trees. Although they have little to do with our story, they deserve mention because of their variety. I doubt whether there is another orchard which has so many different persimmons. They ranged from the small, luscious, date variety—rich red almost to black—to the large, golden type that drips its sweet

juices in autumn, barely able to cling each to its own stem. Without doubt, the persimmons were the crowning glory of that orchard.

Almost immediately Marcia began her bottling of the fruit. Plums come first in the season, followed by apricots and then peaches. You do not bottle apples, but you do bottle their cooked pulp. Pear halves are delicious. Then, of course, summer brings tomatoes to be juiced or bottled whole (skins removed, of course), or simply made into puree or sauce. The variety is endless, to say nothing of the newfangled idea of mango pulp, and sliced or cubed pineapple. All of these, I tell you, are available on that North Coast. The banana alone—of all fruits—defies jamming, bottling, or preserving, but then it is delightful direct from the palm, especially if it be the sugar banana variety.

Wally Finnig set about building up a great herd of Ayrshire cattle. He tidied up the dairy and cream-house which had not been in use for some years. He introduced milking machines, which were still a trifle suspect in those days, and he imported a few sows and a boar to get the piggery going. He also began churning over the acres of pasture which had been almost lost to the giant bracken which infested so many farms under the shadow of the mountain. In short, Wally Finnig was making a good fist of farming. He was receiving the congratulations of his friendly neighbours, until the womanly obsession with the preserving of the fruits of the earth undid him.

To begin with, Marcia had envisaged a dozen or two bottles on her pantry shelves, loaded with the rich golden apricots, the deep yellow clingstone peaches, and the purples and reds of the luscious plums. It is true that, once having started, she felt it was a pity to waste any of their fruit. She could not bear to see a plum fall to the ground without rescuing and utilising it. She never let up in skinning the peaches and slicing them. It is also true that they look especially delightful and have a power to make the mouth water when seen in their Vacola jars.

So there it was: the passion had begun which was to grow into a hydra-headed monster, so powerful it was to dominate the lives of two otherwise simple people. To tell the truth, there are no bland people once an ambition seizes them. Even the weakest of us can be gripped beyond comprehension by a fad, a hobby, or a goal. So it was with Marcia. Her bottling soon became an obsession of the most powerful sort.

Behind his calm countenance, Wally Finnig had always longed to have a farm. He also longed to have children, to be the father of a family, the husband of a wife. Little of this was to come true. Marcia was more wedded to her bottles than to him; more married to her preserving pan than to her loyal husband. The normal wifely things of the evening were set aside in the simplest way: 'Just another batch of these bottles, Wally, and I will be with you.' when she came to be with him, he was either too tired for fellowship or too exhausted to keep awake. Often he had fallen asleep before she arrived in the bedroom. It always took her an hour or so to get to sleep, because her mind was racing with the ideas that came

to her. She had seen a whole untouched tree of apricots in the Tracey farm, or she coveted Uncle Arthur's famous golden pears; and so on. Sleep came grudgingly.

In the morning they would both be up early. Wally would chop the billets for the wood fire. He would line up the cows for the bails, and in a moment the rhythmic sound of the milking machines could be heard. Later there was the clatter of cans and buckets, and still later the rails would clatter down and the herd would wend its way to the northern paddock. Walter would bring back the house-milk and some cream to be made into butter. Breakfast was the time when they really were man and wife. They chatted about the coming events of the day, to the delicious aroma of bacon and eggs and warm, sweet tea—without milk, of course!

Later Walter was to think of those lazy morning times. Without doubt he adored his Marcia, and without question she esteemed him highly. They would look down from the breakfast room, to the long green rows of carrots and peas. They knew they would have to import pickers for the peas, and others to wash the carrots, but then, that was part of Wirril Creek life. They took the bad with the good: the times when Walter would receive little or nothing for the bushels of peas he had sent, and the times they would top the market for quality and receive a fat cheque.

Yet, it seemed, none of this gripped Marcia. She was gradually eaten up with her obsession. When Walter mildly remonstrated about the quantities of bottles she was buying, the bags of sugar that she

used, and the endless packets of lids and rings which were required, she would insist strongly that they were all necessary.

'Think back,' she would say, 'to the Depression!' It wasn't difficult to think back to it. 'Now,' she would say, 'if everyone had preserved fruit and vegetables they would never have starved.'

This was quite logical, and also quite womanly. Wally didn't really think a Depression was around the corner. He understood that Marcia had a consuming passion, and it was doing something for her—like making her into a bottle-wielding martinet. He was her slave, half willing, half protesting.

For her part, she did not see what it was doing to her marriage. Take, for example, the wood-chopping. Wally Finnig had to chop her a pile, not only in the morning, but now also in the evening. The maw of her wood stove was insatiable. She had not one but two preserving pans. Water was not laid on to the kitchen, so her husband had to fill the big cans beside the stove. Also he had had to take trips into Coolbucca for the Vacola jars. He would have to buy the full bags of sugar, and often they would take trips to this farm or that where a tree had not been wanted, its fruit hanging unstripped. It was more than Marcia could bear to see, and soon she had it slipping into bottles.

I am aware that you think I exaggerate. You may even think that I am a moralist, deliberately writing against obsessions, however magnificent and useful they may be, and that I am over-emphasising my point like an unbalanced Aesop. Alas! Such is not the case. The end of the story draws rapidly near. The

time was close when Wally Finnig was to vanish from the sight and haunts of men, at least those which were in Wirril Creek.

It happened like this. Wally had positively stripped every tree in Wirril Creek and environs. He had travelled along the road to Coolbucca, seeking out more trees to strip, and with him would be Marcia, her keen eyes not missing a trick. Where Walter saw nothing, she would espy a virgin tree, laden to the gunwales with fruit, and Walter—all unwilling— would be forced to approach the farmer or the owner and offer a price for the harvest. Marcia always wanted a bargain. She saw no point in spending much on the fruit side of things, especially when she had to pay for sugar and bottles. So Walter would bargain, and the farmer in him would want to be back with his cows, and the masculine in him hated the time spent in bargaining for fruit. By now he was heartily sick of the sight of preserved fruit. Bottles had become anathema. His heart cried out for the Marcia he had known, the sweet womanly creature he had first met at the Tracey farm. She had disappeared in this welter of preserving passion.

Walter had often entrusted his morning and afternoon milkings to Allan Blatt, his most understanding neighbour, and had taken to touring far and wide in his battered Chevvie ute. One part of him adored his wife, and the other part knew a growing anger and despair.

Allan once said, 'Why don't you tell her to stop? The woman's crazy.'

Wally had shaken his head. 'It'll pass,' he said. 'It'll pass.'

'Doubt it meself,' Allan had answered him, 'but then she's your wife. You've got to deal with her, not me.'

So he had subbed in the dairy work on the occasions when Wally Finnig had taken his fruit-finding trips. He would watch the old ute rattle along the corrugated roads, sending up the dust until it was lost in the clouds it had made. Shaking his head, Allan would retire to feed the pigs or rustle up the cattle from the northern paddock. Later he would go to do Wally's milking.

Then it happened. Wally Finnig was seen no more. He had disappeared from sight. In two days he had not been seen. It might have been three or four before Marcia discovered his absence, if she had not run out of wood and sugar. The wood finished first, so Marcia searched around the yards for bits of odd timber. She even went down to their clump of tallowwoods and broke up some of the dry sticks and branches. She knew that Wally would renew her wood pile when he returned. However, when she ran out of sugar, she felt her state of crisis. She made a direct line to the Blatt farm and asked for Allan.

Allan's first question was, 'Where is Wally?'

She seemed a little surprised. 'I'm not sure. I guess he has gone off on some fruit-getting. I think I remember him saying something about going down Taree way.' She puckered up her face. 'Then on the other hand, that might have been the time before.'

Allan Blatt looked at her with astonished anger. His voice was incredulous. 'You mean to say you don't know where he is?'

Marcia didn't even look contrite. 'Wally will be all

right,' she said. 'I don't worry about him.'

'Last time I saw trim,' Allen said, 'he looked as though he was on his last legs. Worn out, he looked. Bone tired.'

It registered faintly with Marcia. 'I guess he'll be back,' she said. 'Meanwhile, I'm out of wood and sugar.'

Allan wanted to explode and shout at her, but he knew it wouldn't register. They walked towards the Finning farm. Suddenly Allan Blatt went pale. 'Wally's Chevie is still there,' he said. 'He couldn't have gone south. He must still be around.'

Something registered in Marcia's face. It looked like fear to Allan. 'If he hasn't gone for fruit, then where is he?' she asked.

Allan stared at her. 'How long's he been "one?" he asked.

At first she did not know. She began searching her memory. Then she said dully, 'Days, I guess. Maybe two days.'

They searched everywhere, and were unable to find him. They called the Coolbucca police and they came. No sign of Wally; none whatever. They called out the men of the district and they combed the countryside. Radio calls were put out. The local switchboard was jammed with calls. Quite a thing for the postmaster. It lifted his category in the telephone levels. The scouts from Coolbucca formed a posse and went over the tracks of the men. They made their way up into the mountains.

Something snapped in Marcia. She began to hate the rows and rows of shiny bottles. She could not stand the silence of the house. She went to Uncle

Arthur's farm. When the weeks passed and nothing happened, she returned to Newcastle. People wondered how she had suddenly lost interest in the preserving, but that was natural enough. Somehow, in the midst of preserving fruit, she had ceased to be fully wifely. She remembered now, with contrition, the drawn, pale face of her husband. Perhaps she had overtaxed his strength—what with all that wood-chopping, and then the work of the farm on top of it. Also the long trips in the Chevie ute. She wished desperately that they could begin it over again. She resolved that if Walter returned she would do that.

For over a year no one went near the farm— except, of course, Allan Blatt, who milked the cows until the solicitor in Coolbucca asked for a sale of the stock and farm equipment. The cheque was sent on to Marcia in Newcastle, and the place was put in the hands of a Coolbucca agent. No one seemed to want to buy Smith's old place, or, as it was now being called, 'Finning's old place.' Some people said there was no luck in it—look what had happened to Wally Finning!—but then no one knew what had happened to him. Finally the district coroner was prevailed upon to investigate. He came and looked at the place, scratched his head, and called for an enquiry.

Marcia came up from Newcastle, to attend the enquiry. The Coolbucca detective-inspector who had been in charge of the case asked for an open verdict: 'Missing presumed dead; possibly by homicide.' The enquiry was brief and without much excitement. Since no clue had ever been found, the verdict was acceptable. Wirril Creek people went back to the

routine of their lives. Allan Blatt took a six-year lease on the property and ran some of his cattle on the pastures. For some reason he never went near the house. Dust settled over the many hundreds of filled Vacola jars. Doubtless the fruit within them ripened to a fine maturity. One or two of them had been opened by tramps and chance travellers, but for the most part they stood untouched, silent sentinels of a curious and unexplained past.

THEN the estate agent at Coolbucca put up a sign in front of the farm. It was a 'FOR SALE' sign. Allan's lease was due to expire, and he wasn't anxious to renew it. He might have bought the property had it had no painful associations with the Finnigs. He let the agent show people over the farm. Potential buyers viewed the walls of bottles with astonishment.

Finally a young couple from Sydney bought the farm. Allan Blatt came across to help them move in. A huge pantehnicon arrived with their furniture. They began to place the furniture. Then they came to the large pantry, with its walls of bottles. At first they tried out the fruit, and found that most bottles were well preserved. Just in the jars themselves, there was a fortune. Alan helped them attack the stock of fruit. They planned to stack it in one of the outbuildings. Backwards and forwards they went, with two wheelbarrows. The level of the stack was lowered. Years of disuse had made the place musty. They coughed and spluttered with the dust.

They came to the final wall of bottles: apricots, peaches, pears and plums, along with apple pulp,

now a bit brown and stained with the years. Patiently they loaded the wheelbarrows and made the tiring trips to the outbuilding. The musty smell increased as the imprisoned air was released. The wall of bottles was lowered. Allan looked down over the wall and blanched.

Seated, leaning against the wall, arms folded as though in resignation, was a dried and lonely figure — Wally Finnig!

His clothes hung loosely and dustily upon his body, itself now like dried parchment. Hollow sockets stared unseeingly. Allan Blatt hurried the young couple out of the room. He telephoned the police at Coolbucca.

As I said before, Marcia Finnig had married again. They said she was quite shaken with the news, as well she might have been.

The way I heard the story from Allan Blatt was this:

'You see, Wally was a patient bloke. Never complained. Adored Marcia, even though he hated the preserving and the fruit.

'Not hard to know how it happened. Poor beggar was tired with all the wood-chopping and splitting, all the fruit gathering, the trips for peaches, pears, plums and apples, to say nothing of mangoes, pineapples, and the like. You know, she even bottled beans and peas! I guess there was no future in life for him.

'You might say he ought to have brought Marcia to her senses, but how would he have done that? It

was just not Wally's cup of tea to do something like that. So he got tired, terribly tired.

'I can just imagine him. He's tired and goes into the pantry to take a quiet rest in the cool. She has stacks of bottles she's filled and preserved. So she gets a tidying fit and starts to stack them—hundreds of the darned things! Doesn't even notice Wally asleep in the corner! He sleeps for hours, he's so worn out. Then he wakes up, perhaps at night, and he's walled in. You might say that any man could push over a wall of bottles. Not if you had seen that wall. They looked like thousands—those bottles—layer after layer, bottles on bottles.

'So Wally just lies down and sleeps again. Maybe he runs out of air and suffocates—I don't know. Maybe he calls out time and again to Marcia, but she is in the kitchen doing more preserving!'

Allan sighed, scratched his forehead with the index finger of his right hand, and looked at me. 'Nobody is going to believe you when you tell this story,' he said. He knew for sure that I would write it; that it was too good for me to pass up.

'I doubt,' he said, 'that you'll ever convince anybody it happened. They'll reckon a man would have picked, kicked, pushed and shoved, and torn those bottles down and smashed his way through.'

He nodded as he said this. 'Maybe any other man than Wally Finnig would have done that,' he said. My theory is that Wally was glad to be finished with bottles and fruit and preserving. There would be no future in it.' He scratched his forehead again.

'You know,' he said, 'Wally seemed to be completely at peace when we found him. No signs of a struggle.

Just a resignation, you might say: a kind of peaceful patience.' He nodded again. 'Wally was always like that,' he said; 'even up to the last.'

He eyed me, much as to say, 'Don't think I'm joking, or having a hit at Wally Finnig, because I'm not.' Then he came out with it, and no suspicion even of a chuckle. 'I guess he knew in a way that he would end up being preserved too, because that's what happened. His missus preserved him at the last.'

He looked down as he said that, and we were both silent. Even after Allan Blatt left me and I went over the details, I could see Wally settling himself down peacefully behind the implacable wall of bottles, and submitting tranquilly to his eternal rest. I even got to wondering whether he had welcomed that end, but then I knew I could not be sure.

SOMETHING IN THE SILO

He peered into the silo but could see nothing. It was the underground silo, not the overhead one. Its galvanised iron cover was just above the ground, moveable when they wanted to lift out the ensilage. At the moment, it was almost empty. One end was open above the ground. He trembled as he slid into the sweet-smelling stuff. Someone had told him it smelt like matured whisky, but he wouldn't know that. He had never smelt whisky, matured or otherwise. Still, he like the sweet, yeasty odour. It was evocative of past days; but right now there was no evocation. He felt stifled within.

His trembling was not from fear, but from a low anger that simmered somewhere within him. A strange idea, that his life was like this covered pit, came to him, surprising him faintly. Then it was gone. The machete he had gripped so tightly in his anger now slipped from his fingers. He knew vaguely that it was by his side. He lay back on the warm ensilage and stared up, sightlessly, at the dark iron roof.

Ideas began tumbling over him. Anger always stimulated ideas. Some of them were new and surprising, but mainly they were the old ideas renewing

themselves. He felt the acid edge of their encounter. They increased his bitterness—or maybe they just released it. Here he was, helpless in the face of this flood of ideas. He squirmed where he lay, glad of the covering of the galvanised roof, but raging with the rising of the old angers.

As far back as he could remember, they had ridiculed him. The family seemed to have a set on him. He had learned a protective blandness, so that when they started on him he could look back at them blankly. Perhaps they were incensed by his blandness, wanting to break into him. He didn't know. He simply knew that injustice was the one thing he could never handle. Injustice was what demeaned him, and he had no way of rectifying the matter, no way of bringing back a just balance.

He had come from the maize field with cobs as fat as your forearm, thick, long and filled out. Some of them were short and stubby. They were the ones with red grain. The golden ones were leaner, but their grain was longer. He had loved the feel of them, rich with goodness, fine fodder for the cattle and the horses. He loved the crisp feel of the dry husks, and his fingers always itched to twist back the dry covering of the cobs, revealing the gold or the red beneath. Every cob was different; each a new experience. He derived immense satisfaction as they were heaped in the centre of the floor, growing upwards in a pile towards the roof bearings, those old tallowwood and blackbutt timbers that had aged to seasoned wood.

So the machete lay beside him where it had slipped from his fingers. His arms rarely wearied, but today they were tired, although not only from the work. It

was from rages such as these that his body tired. He could feel the muscles tighten around the neck, and something like a dull pain in the shoulder muscles. He beat his arms into the soft ensilage and let his anger have its way. Why did they always pick on him?

Sometimes he thought about it all in a logical, almost detached manner, and then it did not seem so bad. At such times, his father seemed almost reasonable, and not the stony-eyed martinet that he appeared to be at others. Norman, Paul's tall brother, seemed almost mild, and Cecil quiet and serene. His mother was her own self, unchanging with his moods, but then she rarely commented on his moods. She let him be. The sisters also generally let him be, until his blandness irritated them. Then they would try to stir him, and make him to be otherwise than bland. He admired them, but today his hate rose with his gorge. He grabbed the machete and chopped away at the loose fodder about him. His rage to him was rational.

When had it all begun? He was not sure. He seemed to have a generally pleasant memory somewhere, preceding the present angry one. Back there, in the almost forgotten days of early childhood, it had seemed that something wonderful was ahead of him. He had been sure he would attain to it, but every time he made a move they ridiculed him. He was different from them, and they knew it. It was almost like the strange chook in the yard, set on by the others and not let go until it is pecked to death. Even in his rage he could spare a faint smile. He was no chook. In fact his family did not try to kill him. It was

just that they never let him alone. They never let him be his own self.

He was weary. He would try to lie still. He would endeavour to calm his thoughts. He would seek to defeat them. So he lay still, and again the machete slipped from his fingers. At such points in his mood, he would try to escape from the tyranny of his passions. He would try to remember good things. In fact, only one thing would come, and it came time and again. It was the memory of an act of kindness done anonymously by someone in the family. He had been at Grandpa's place and had awakened early in the morning. Leastways, he was not fully awake, but drowsing. He had felt the blazing sun on his face and yet he longed for sleep. Somehow he had drifted off, and later awoke with surprise. A blanket had been hung high on the verandah to shield his face from the hot sun. He had glowed with the gratuitous act. Even now he felt a tremor of joy at the memory. Then the anger blazed back. One act of kindness in a lifetime! His spirit snarled at the idea. Here he was, seventeen years of age, almost a man, and there was only one outstanding act of kindness.

He heard the dinner gong from the house. He knew that gong by heart. It was a fine old Burmese gong. His father loved Eastern things. That was why he had collected old brasses and Japanese bamboo screens, Chinese wickerwork and the like. Dadda loved that old gong even more, it seemed to Paul, than the children he had sired. He expected them to make life themselves. He had been brought up in the Stoic tradition, so why not they also?

The gong was faint in its mellow, floating notes,

and at that moment he hated it. Yet it was something against which he could rebel, and he was faintly grateful. He could refuse it. To refuse it was to refuse his father. So this was what he would do. He had known in his bones that his visit to the silo was no ordinary one. Today he had to resolve something. Something had to end, or something had to begin. He was not quite sure what, but something would have to happen. Again he thought of the faint consciousness which had seemed to be his, far back in time, even before life's regular and monotonous consciousness had begun. Yet in his anger, a faint but delicate line of pleasure penetrated his dark mood. It had a promise, but so tenuous that he dared not give it place. The disappointment it could bring would make his present pain unbearable.

Suddenly he was aware of a presence in the silo, and thought he heard a rustling. Yet anger dispelled his natural caution. He cared little for anything. For this reason he ignored the faint movement he had partly sensed in the ensilage. His mind was racing with his innumerable memories.

THE GONG had faded away. Dadda would not notice that he was absent. He seemed, anyway, to care little for Paul. Then after a time he *would* notice, and say with some irritation, 'Where's that damned brother of yours?' It was always 'that damned brother', or, 'that blasted idiot'. He knew that his father never asked his mother, 'Where is that son of yours?'

It appeared that his brothers were the link between the father and his fool son. Right at this moment

they would be saying, 'Don't know where he is, Dadda. We left him in the maize field. He was pulling cobs and cutting corn. He had Major in the dray. Guess he might be feeding Major now.' His Dadda would nod and grunt and then look down at his meal in disgust. After a time he would begin eating again.

Paul thought about his father. One part of him wanted to get personally to his father, but he could never make it to that point. Night after night he would lie in his bed waiting for his father to come and say goodnight to him. That had never happened— not in living memory. He knew his father's patterns, the things he did before going to bed. First he would have an orange. Next Dadda would go around the house, trying the windows. He would go into the bathroom, brush his teeth and make noisy gargling flushes. Then he would cough and spit for a time. After that he would pad to the back door and try the lock. Finally, he would pad up to the bedroom. Every night Paul would say, 'Goodnight, Dadda,' and would get a gruff response. Dadda would never come in or talk. Some nights Paul would just be disappointed, but after a time the anger began. Perhaps it stayed with him through the night.

Now that anger was growing. He grabbed handfuls of ensilage and gripped them hard. He pounded them into the cushiony fodder. Then he let his arms flay about him. He began to hate the mild light that was beginning to penetrate his cover. Outside, the day had been mild, grey from bland clouds and a covered sun. He had liked the grey silence. It had fitted his mood. He almost dreaded the sun breaking through it. It would flood the silo pit with light.

HE REALISED with a sudden start that he was getting nowhere. Because of this, he started his inner court case over again. In these cases he would be the judge, the plaintiff, the defendant, and the witnesses. First he would judge the world for its idiot ways. God must be either a fool or a perverse humorist to have put him in the family he was in. God must know all things, and one thing He would surely know was that he, Paul, was a sensitive person. He was artistic. He could write. Given the opportunity, he could become a famous author. Words danced about in his mind. In his good times, he could pun furiously. 'Paronomasia, 'his English teacher had called it. He loved words.

The trouble was that he never had time to write. It was up early in the morning, near after five. Go out and bring in the cows. The night paddock was too large. Sometimes the herd would get out of the night paddock. Maybe Jessie, the cunning old Jersey house-cow, would lift the latch on the gate, or Norman would go through for cutting timber before sunset and leave it open. Maybe a stupid motorist would sneak in for moonlight mushrooming and by dawn the cows would be over the other side. That rogue Brindle would get through the fence and up near the road. Anything could happen. Then there was the milking, the separating of the cream. Breakfast was scarcely over when Dadda would come to life and they would be out on fencing or ploughing, or making holes to sow the cattle pumpkins, or maybe one of the stock was in trouble. Paul always got the worst end of the stick.

Had he not been angry, he might have laughed.

Sometimes he did laugh, but in that he was alone. When he laughed, they seemed to think he was an idiot. They didn't see much to laugh about, except perhaps his memory. They knew he always forgot. In fact he never forgot. That had simply been his excuse. 'Paul, why didn't you come to lunch?' 'I forgot. "Why didn't you polish your boots?" 'I forgot.' He always got away with it. That 'I forgot', with the bland look, had helped him out of a lot of trouble.

Even so, he hated the memory of it. It took away his dignity. That was the price he had had to pay. And he had paid it, resenting the loss of honour. He let them think he was a fool. They thought it too, all but Mumma. She understood. Sometimes she would corner him—innocently enough—and she would encourage him.

'Paul,' she would say, 'take no notice. They don't know that you are clever.'

He would look at her, and with a little cunning. 'Clever?' he would say. 'How am I clever?'

She would smile gently at that, and go on with her hoeing of the garden. She loved the garden. Amazingly enough, she even loved hoeing.

He never let his mind move along that dangerous line. It was foolish to let yourself think you were clever. That would drain away all the anger. You could think that being clever, and, of course, being clever secretly, made them all into fools. But he had never thought of them like that. Take Dadda, for example He knew just about everything. He was practically omniscient. Boring as he was when he talked, he knew most things. You could never trick him. Not, of course, that you dared try. You would get

something back for that, quick smart. No, Dadda knew all he needed to know and a bit more.

Cecil didn't know everything, but what he didn't know he could handle well, particularly with his fists. He couldn't bear to be wrong. Cecil had it in for Dadda because of that. Cecil never forgave Dadda his special knowledge. You had to watch Cecil. He could also get bitter. Not Norman, however. He handled all things quite well. It was Paul's turn now not to be forgiving about something. He could not bear Norman's confidence. Take Wendy, for example.

Wendy! The very thought of her put him into a state of extreme ambivalence. How he loved her! How he hated her! He really hated Norman for being so clever, so suave, so competent with her. Wendy thought Norman was marvellous. Well, in a way he might be. Paul admitted that grudgingly, but it only fed his anger. He wanted Wendy to know that he was not the bland-faced fool they took him to be. He had special thoughts about Wendy. Indeed, he had a whole book of poems about her, but he was browed if he was going to show it to her! She might laugh. He guarded the book jealously. He and Norman were close enough—as brothers go—but that was one part of his life Norman would never know. As for the girls—his sisters—he would be horrified to let them get to the first poem. How they would ridicule him!

Something else accompanied his thoughts about Wendy, but now that he tried to recapture it, it evaded him. He almost had it. He was on the edge of remembering something pleasurable when he heard Cecil's voice. It was quite unpleasant. Cecil swore easily, and Paul felt demeaned by the words. Cecil

was calling, 'Hey, Paul, you idiot! Where are you? Lunch is almost over. You'd better come quickly or Dadda will have you.'

Dadda would have him! Well, what about that? Dadda ought to talk! It was his cruelty and unjust ways that made life such a hell. Wendy had gone from his thoughts and the hot bitterness came rushing back. He lay still. If he were to lie doggo they would never get him. They would never think of looking in the silo pit. Serve them right! He scarcely breathed as he heard Cecil passing, raging in some childish tirade. He had a perverse joy at knowing he had tricked the family.

He returned to his thoughts. He had come here for a final decision. It was that either the family came to terms with him or he would leave the farm. That was it! *He would leave the farm!* They would be sorry. Where would they get someone who would milk twenty-five cows by hand twice a day? Where would they get someone to clean up the yards and barrow the manure away? Who would do that and feed the poddies too? Who would take the blame when the poddies got dysentery? Who would dose them up, even getting up in the night to give them medicine?

His mind began to boil. Pictures came flashing in wild irrationality. What about the night old White Dame had farrowed and he and Norman had helped her? Fourteen she had had in that litter. The old idiot! She had tried to lie on every one of them. They had saved the lot whilst she was in her dopey state, and all that between two and five in the morning. Eventually they had gone off to milking and left her, making sure there was no straw blocking up the farrowing

rail. But she had made sure there was. Expertly she had stuffed up the rails, and then turned to sit—or lie—on her newborn progeny. Even Norman had been white with anger when Dadda accused them of neglecting the old sow. Paul had cried with pain. For the first time in his life he had wanted to batter his father. Why had the old boy been so misunderstanding? Every suckling piglet that died was their fault. Dadda never encouraged them nor understood how the sows failed.

‘What about the flood, eh?’ he shouted inside himself. ‘What about the drowned poddies, floating down the roaring river which the day before had been a trickling creek?’ He could see them now and he shivered. Twenty of them, lying about in the debris, eyes staring in death, their bodies stretched out cold. That was when he had had his big argument with God. What the blazes was He doing all the time? Probably laughing at the whole thing, or being superbly indifferent, like a Pommie aristocrat! He had never forgiven God for that. God had great powers if He wanted to use them, but He rarely seemed interested in doing things which would ease life for His creatures.

By now he had forgotten Cecil. Norman’s voice began to sound out, but he ignored that also. Norman could expect little from him. His anger flashed as he thought about Wendy—Wendy, who was too young for Norman. He was four years older than her. She really belonged to him, Paul. But Norman never seemed to mind what damage he did—just went his way as he liked, and as superior as they come!

Suddenly it was too much for Paul. He wanted to cry, but the tears would not come. He wanted to

shout against the whole unfairness of it. Misunderstood, ridiculed, subject to injustice, and, in it all, not one shred of love in the whole family—except for Mumma. Ah, yes, except for Mumma. Then he remembered that Mumma had not thought much of the Wendy affair. She had called that relationship in question. She had thought that Paul was not really seeing Wendy as she was. He was seeing her romantically and not realistically. Now the tears came to his eyes. Even Mumma did not understand.

It was this last thing which drained him. He lay in a grey stupor on the ensilage and felt the darkness slowly engulf him. He was all alone in the world. None stood with him. Indignity and injustice dogged his steps. Ridicule swept over him in waves of cold memory. The tears smarted his eyes but would not flow to bring some relief. It was then that he knew the world was wholly cruel, wholly hostile. He knew he was alienated, and that he could not get back to some place where once he had been loved. The single incident of kindness seemed engulfed in the cold hostility of God and man. There was nothing that was not bleak. The drab sky outside was brightness compared to the darkness that was seeping about him.

It was at this point that the idea came, or, rather, revisited him. This time it came with icy finality. It was the thought of death. Even in his angers, death had never appealed to him, but now it did. It seemed like some sweet relief. He remembered two lines from his beloved poet Keats:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk.

‘That is it,’ he thought. ‘I’ll float out of life.’ He envisaged the deep pool on the flat, far behind the dam. He could go there, lie in the water, and refuse to swim. He could let the water flood his lungs. He had read about that. It wasn’t a painful death. Some even had beautiful experiences as they faced the end. They went out in a sort of Keats-like drama.

In his bitterness, he could see Dadda, and even Mumma. Mumma had tried to destroy his dream of Wendy. Norman had ignored his yearning for this one girl. Norman had many. Likewise Cecil. He knew that his sisters giggled about the whole matter. None of them understood his passion to be a writer, to use beautiful words, to have them at his command and weave out of them the fabric of rich fiction and dynamic thought. Rage and grief mingled together in his mind. Years of impending storms broke over his head and encompassed his heart. If he could have raised the machete then, he would have turned it on himself. Only for the thought of dreamlike death in water he would have done so. He was amazed at his rage, but not frightened. He had a sadistic pleasure in feeling the anguish within himself.

He also had a sadistic pleasure as he saw the eyes of his horrified parents. He could see Cecil staring in dreadful disbelief. Norman he knew would actually weep when he saw the body floating there. And what of Dadda? Well, at last he would remember what he had done, the injustices he had caused, the wrong judgements he had executed. He would be sorry, of course—in his stony-eyed, cold, hard way, he would be sorry. He would curse himself for the fool he had been.

Now the boy was really in earnest. Some part of him was like thick, cold ice, hard and unbreakable. He would do it. He would let nothing stop him. He lay there, stiff with a venomous rage, hard and harsh with anger. He had never known wrath like this. In its magnitude even God seemed dwarfed. Even so, a faint stirring lay behind the unbreakable decision he had made. He did not try to comprehend what it was. He wanted nothing to deter him from his fierce act of will. He visualised how he would reach the creek without their knowing. He would slip around the hill. He knew how to do it. He would do it as they did it in the militia: quick, sudden spurts, then sidling in the grass; finally gaining the banks of the creek and slipping down behind them; waiting to see whether anyone had followed him, and then slowly moving into the water . .

HE WAS about to move when he heard the rustling. Dimly he remembered the sound which had come to him before. This was the same noise. A faint touch of fear visited him. It was the sound of slithering. In a flash he knew what it was and he froze, becoming inanimate. His body was rigid, but his thoughts came in pounding waves. It was a snake, a large black silo snake, and highly venomous. His mind ran through a memory film from two years before, when they had begun to clean out the pit. They had found not just one snake but many. There were deadly browns, the fairly harmless larger snakes, and also the black ones. That had not been funny. It had been a close thing for Norman. He had a hay fork with him and

was shifting a last layer of matted ensilage. The snakes had come at him.

It had been lucky about Dadda. He had his double-barrelled shotgun, and he was standing over the pit. The temporary roof had been moved and he had a clear sight, but Norman was in the way. He had shouted to Norman to get back, and then he let the snakes have it from two barrels. He had reloaded in a flash and the gun had roared again. All that had been left were shattered reptiles in their death throes. The sight had been sickening.

Somewhere within him a venomous demon mocked. 'What about this brave death?' it asked.

Paul's rage had not subsided. 'Why not?' he had replied with equal venom, but in the moment his mind spoke, his heart rebelled. Not death by poison! That would be horrible. What the family would see would be dreadful. Even as he thought it, he knew he did not want to die; not this way, anyway. He had not moved, but his eyes were peering into the darkness. He knew that if he moved, the snake would be at him, perhaps as much scared of him as he of it.

It was then that the miracle happened. Somewhere the clouds had parted and the sun had broken through. It was preternaturally brilliant—at least, that was how it appeared to the boy. In the same moment as he started up he saw the fast movement of the snake. Had the sun not shone, and had the pit not been brilliantly illuminated, the snake would have been on him. As it was, its head was back, and he could see the flicker of the tongue. The flashing moment seemed like an endless age, as though time were poised. He had often heard of this strange

change in the motion of time, but he was glad. He knew a human being can think quicker than a snake. His hand grasped the machete and in an instant lunged and cut. Dismayed, he saw the snake swirl and flash at him the second time. He heard himself roar with indignation and terror, and words escaped his lips that had long been hidden in his own dark depths. He swerved his arm with the machete and came up at the darting serpent. He saw with incredible joy that he had gashed it below the head. Even so, it twisted and made another ugly spurt, but its head missed as it struck. Its body had obeyed serpentine intelligence, but the head was unable to serve it. His hand twisted and he brought the chopper down on its neck, severing it below the head. The body of the reptile carried on its deadly mission, but the worst was over. He heard his breath expire, and felt the triumph mount within him. For some strange or crazy reason, he was muttering to himself, 'The snake in the pit! The snake in the pit!' He was amazed to find his mind giving the whole thing apocalyptic proportions. His eyes were staring at the snake, and, unaccountably, he kept thinking he had killed a snake within himself. He laughed mirthlessly for the idiot fantasy that it was, but his laugh was mirthless because he was trying to deny the reality of his thought. A snake in a pit! He shook his head at the idea.

The body of the snake curled and circled, twisted and coiled, but he knew it was dead. He took it by the tail and threw it out of the pit. He shovelled the head with his machete, wondering whether it was dead. He flipped it up into the sunlight and then he

clambered up the sloping side of the pit, crawling through the opening. In the sunshine he shook himself, brushing off the clinging ensilage. The sweet smell of it all came to him as a steady fragrance of victory.

He could not get out of his mind and mind's sight the picture of his father blazing away at the snakes which had threatened Norman. He could see the anger in his father's eyes. A faint perception, a warm understanding, wriggled its way through his brain, striking towards its vital centre. Somehow his father did care. At least, he cared for Norman.

WHEN he opened the door into the living room, they were all, amazingly enough, still at the table. It seemed like a hoary year since he entered the silo pit, and not much less since Cecil was calling him. The meal had been eaten, but the table was not empty. Remains of eating were there, but the family for some reason looked as though it had been in conference. Paul could not remember them ever having had a conference. He could sense they had been discussing something; him, probably.

He had anticipated anger from his father, mild reproach from his mother, and the usual lofty insults from the boys and the girls. There was none of this. He was faintly surprised, and partly suspicious. They looked at him, but they were not staring. He was puzzled. His father spoke first.

'What happened, son?' he demanded. He rarely used the word 'son'. Paul felt a gentle tremor of surprise, and even delight.

'I was down in the silo pit,' he said. He was mildly defensive, but a feeling was growing within him that he was not being called on to defend himself. He even liked the silence that settled over his remarks. They were waiting for more. Strangely enough, his mother did not rush to the iron stove to get his meal from the oven.

'I killed a snake,' he said. They showed their surprise. So did he. He saw their concern. He had never expected concern from them.

'Red-bellied black,' he said. 'It came at me.'

'It would come at you,' Dadda agreed. He was looking steadily at Paul. 'How did you kill it?' he asked.

'With the machete,' Paul said. He grinned. 'You weren't there with the shotgun.'

'No, I wasn't,' Dadda said briefly. His gaze was unwavering. Suddenly Paul liked that gaze.

'I kept remembering you with the shotgun,' he said.

'Did you?' said Dadda. He paused, as though meditating. 'You need a shotgun with snakes. Too close for a machete. You could miss.'

'Didn't get him fully the first time,' said Paul. 'Nicked him near the head. But I got him fully on the second round.'

There was a murmur from the girls. Mumma went to the stove and brought out his meal, piping hot. He saw the slabs of roast beef and gravy. The potatoes, parsnips and pumpkins were baked. He licked his lips. 'Anyway, I sliced off his head,' he said.

'Sit down and eat your meal,' said Dadda.

The vegetables certainly were piping hot. The outsides of the potatoes were crisp. Inside, they were

floury. Beautiful! He bore the heat of them gladly, feeling their taste.

Dadda was still looking at him. 'We missed you,' he said briefly.

He looked down at the plate, hiding his eyes. He was thinking rapidly, 'They missed me!' then he thought that through. Somehow they knew! How would they know? 'Perhaps,' he thought wryly, 'because we are a family.' He had always considered his father omniscient. He had always thought, 'He knows everything. He knows what I am thinking at this moment.'

Even so, he raised his eyes to his father, and they stared at each other in silence.

His father's eyes were strong, but they were gentle. 'Hell!' Paul thought. Then a strange idea came into his mind. 'He's a patriarch,' he thought, 'a regular patriarch.' He could never remember smiling at his father. He smiled. 'Wish you had been there, Dadda,' he said, 'with that shotgun of yours. That would have been good.'

There was a silence around the table. He could see the soft surprise in their eyes. In a strange but beautiful moment—hurtful to him, yet liberating—he knew he had been wrong. He had been wrong for years. He had been wrong about Dadda and Mumma. He had even been wrong about the dead calves and White Dame's crushed piglets. Some of the facts were still there, but he had mistaken the facts for the truth. The real truth had always been that Dadda was a patriarch and Mumma the matriarch. Cecil was OK and Norman no less. The girls were just the girls, but they were part of it. He tackled the pumpkin with

zest. He liked the rich, earthy sweetness of baked pumpkin.

'Great meal, Mumma,' he said.

Mumma was looking at him, faintly puzzled but pleased.

Norman said something strange: 'Wait till Wendy hears about her hero.'

He looked at Norman. Was this the old teasing, the veiled insult, the cruel innuendo? Norman was looking at him calmly. Norman really believed Wendy would think him a hero. He looked at Cecil. Cecil was nodding. Cecil never nodded.

Part of an old film was in his mind, showing the creek below the dam, and especially the deep pool where they swam in summer. This was the pool where he was going to go out peacefully, and hurt them by his death. This was where they would have been pained by his floating, upturned body. Here they would have met their judgement for their cruelty. He almost grinned at his former foolish thought, but it was not really a matter for laughing. What would Wendy have thought? Wendy! He went cold at the thought.

Dadda was talking again. 'Make a good story,' he was saying. 'You could call it "A Snake in the Pit".'

Paul started up wildly. 'It isn't there any more. It isn't in the pit. It's dead. I got it out of the pit.' He hardly knew why he was saying it, and then he knew he was trying to cover his embarrassment and his joy. Dadda had accepted his identity as a writer! Then he knew it was more than that. Dadda had accepted his identity—all of it.

Identity! Where had he gotten that word from?

Why, sure, he had an identity. It was his own. It was then, for the first time, that he realised everyone had an identity; everyone was unique. He looked around him, at each member of the family. He wanted to jump up and shout. He wanted to hug every one of them. Nobody in his family ever hugged, but to hell with that! He would love to hug them. Instead he drank his sweet white tea, and tucked into the gramma pie in which Mumma excelled.

When he finished, he said steadily, 'Think I'll duck across and see Wendy.'

Dadda grinned. 'You do that,' he said. 'Only be back for milking.'

'I'll be back for milking all right,' he assured them all. He looked at his mother. 'Great meal, Mumma,' he said, wiping his mouth with the table napkin. Mumma stared at him, a trifle surprised, but she was happy enough.

Dadda said, in parting, 'Don't forget that story.'

Paul kept thinking about that as he saddled his mare, Jenny. He kept thinking about it as he galloped across the ferny phalaris. Going past the deep pool, he scarcely gave that water a thought. He had the faint idea that when Wendy met him she would not see him as a boy any more. He liked that thought as he galloped on. Also he kept seeing Dadda, leaning back in his chair, chin in hand, and he kept thinking of Dadda as a patriarch.

THE NEEDLE

HE WAS running—running into the face of the enemy. His head was down, his Tommy-gun gripped in both hands. Others had rifles with fixed bayonets. He had his single Tommy-gun, the magazine filled. He had other magazines about his person. He was running, running towards the strange cries of the enemy, and in the darkness he could see the brilliance of the explosions. They shot up like an overplayed display of fireworks. He kept running towards them.

Others were running too. Some of them did not run very fast. They were cautious, seeking out the enemy, steady in their action. He had a high level of excitement and intention. So he passed the others, one by one, until he was ahead of them all, leading them, out at the front, pressing on, his finger on the trigger of the gun he held with two hands.

Then he came upon the machine-gun nest. His finger pressed the trigger as the muzzle of his weapon was pointed towards the enemy emplacement. As his weapon spat violently, there was a burst of yammering sound from the MG nest. The spitting of them both was a quick, angry exchange. As the enemy gun ceased its yammering, the last burst hit him, smashing his right leg, lifting him from the ground, and then throwing him forward.

No immediate pain. Just surprise. Astonishment in fact, and then indignation. Other weapons also ceased to yammer. There was silence for a long moment, and his war-mates swept by. In fact they did not so much sweep by as they slewed to his right, not following the road on which he had fallen. They swerved into the rubber trees of the plantation, and were lost to him. Away to the right, guns began to yammer, and then the guns of his men gave their own whining, high-pitched song, and after a time their sounds were lost. There was the 'plop!' of mortars, then the roar of their explosions, but the action had shifted away from him. Nothing stirred in the MG nest. Life had been frozen into death.

Now the pain came. It came in vast, high waves, enveloping him, like some rude invasion that would sweep away his dignity. In that moment he recognised it for what it was—an enemy that was worthy of his response. It was a stranger, but it brought a different kind of confrontation. It made him draw up to his true height in support and defence of his dignity.

Behind him lay generations, indeed, many centuries of men and women trained to accept pain and hold it worthily. So he lay there, not whimpering, not even thinking of tears. In a strange way he was grateful for the darkness and for the aloneness of his situation. Of course, he wished some, or one, of his men would appear and carry him out on a stretcher. He was not a Stoic by nature, however stoical had been his historical conditioning. He loved the physical sense of wellbeing, but now that the enemy had

come—this enemy of pain and suffering—he was willing to do it battle.

He lay there until first light. There were still flickers of gunfire about him. A sniper or two had remained, and one might destroy him were he to move. So he kept still. First light showed the grotesque forms of fallen soldiers, friends and enemies. He was sad, being forced to see them. His own leg, smashed in the thigh, lay awkwardly, rakishly. It was like a foreign object below where it was smashed. It would not respond.

He watched the flow of the blood, trying to remember how much of this a man could lose and yet live, and lose and not live. The matter was not merely academic, but he was detached, as though his ruminations were for another person. He contemplated a moment of using his weapon upon himself, but decided that was loss of dignity. He would fight both pain and despair, and later he was glad he had done that.

He saw a glow in the east, a hot red ball rising through the smoke and smudge of the oil fires, and the drifting dust where the mortars were blowing out their powers. Then he heard the sounds of men running. His tears were no longer held in check. He wept as they bent over him, lifting him tenderly but strongly as they gripped him. He gasped out his joy as they hurried him to a truck. The pain which had been partially allayed by his stillness on the ground returned, and he had to bite his lips to keep back his cries. Also grey waves of cold sweat were breaking through his blood and his skin. Then the grey mist took over and he was wholly enveloped.

When he opened his eyes, they were still walking, panting and sweating as they carried him to the truck. He remembered, in an idle thought, that he was a heavy man. They had gently taken his weapon from him, gripping it as he had been. They were carrying him, holding his leg, trying to lessen the reason for pain. But the pain was there.

Someone drew a flask of whisky from his hip pocket. 'Drink this, mete,' he was saying.

He was surprised that his voice did not come. He shook his head, negatively. When his voice came it was a shrill cry. 'Stimulant,' he gasped. 'Will make the blood flow again.' they nodded to each other as they were bent over him, crouching in gentle sympathy. He felt the pain-waves again, and the cold sweat. They had laid him in the back of a green utility truck. There were others there, and although he could not see them, he knew who they were.

The truck roared into life. The men waved to him as he moved out of their orbit. Beside him, and even under him, his fellow-wounded whimpered. Then they began to weep, and two of them were crying out. After a time, as the truck bumped and thumped over the rough terrain, they began shrieking and screaming in voices that had high-pitched protest. He knew they were better, these Indians, for being able to express their anguish. His lips were tight, holding back the cries.

AT THE hospital they were efficient. The sorrow he had seen in the eyes of his mates was not there—only practical concern—so he rested back in their com-

petence. He felt himself being borne along. Then they were in the theatre. Remarkably enough, they were in quietness. The noises of war had died away, and silent figures, garbed in white, were moving about. Only the Irish major broke that silence. He laughed incessantly, as though the whole thing were a huge joke. Watching him, the man could not be sure that his laughter was out of humour. He wondered whether it was tender embarrassment the surgeon felt, and whether laughter was his cover-up.

HE LONGED for the anaesthetic. An orderly came to him with a hypodermic needle. He was about to put it into his arm when the surgeon spun around on him. The humour was gone out of his eyes. Alarm had replaced it. 'Don't do that!' he shouted urgently. 'You'll kill the man!' Then his expression gentled down. 'He hasn't enough blood left to take the stuff.'

The orderly was confused, agitated. 'Didn't know that,' he mumbled. He went off, holding the syringe upwards.

The major began to grin again. He winked at his patient. 'Got to do the right thing,' he said, and his laughter flowed out into the white operating room with its stainless steel equipment. He bent over the back of his immediate patient, flicking out fragments of shrapnel with a pair of long tweezers. The man winced and groaned with each removal. He saw that this patient also had not been given anaesthetic.

His own mind was moving restlessly. He was thinking that anaesthetic was definitely what he needed.

At that point the surgeon handed over his work to an efficient sister. He came across to his new patient and asked genially, 'What's your name?'

'Denny; Denny James,' the man replied.

The major nodded. 'You will need blood before your operation,' he said.

'Go ahead,' he said calmly.

The major gave a happy snort. 'We'll do that, begorrah,' he said. 'But you won't like it.' He called to an orderly, who came with a bottle of blood and some rubber tubing. He also had a beaker with glass tubing fixed to its base.

The major began probing for a vein. He snorted happily, probing, pushing, seeking. 'Everything's gone flat,' he told his assistant. 'We may never find a vein.' after a time he found the vein, and they began pouring in the blood. Denny knew little about medicine and surgery. He had lived without sickness or serious injury. He had never come under an operation. So he watched the blood flow first into the beaker, and then down the glass tubing.

The sister came across and watched. She shook her head and said, 'You could kill him, Major. You know that.'

He nodded cheerfully. 'Either he dies from an airbubble or he dies from no brood,' he said, and he gave a short, barking laugh. 'What would you do, Sister?' he asked. His eyes were watching the blood. She shook her head again, and went back to the shrapnel-picking.

The major's eyes were kindly. 'We don't often do this,' he explained. 'But you are dead, clinically, anyway.'

The man knew what he meant. He had lost more blood than a man may lose and hope to live. His thoughts were cut short. Something was happening to his chest. It was no less than horrific. The major's eyes were twinkling. 'That's how a balloon feels,' he said, 'when someone is blowing it up!'

Denny could have done without the humour. The pressure was terrifying. He wanted to shout, 'Stop! I will be blown up! My lungs must burst!'

Down in his leg the pain had intensified. They had put a ligature on the thigh, but now the pressure of the blood was reaching the area of pain, and he was sensitised to agony.

The major was breathing heavily. 'Just lie there,' he said curtly. 'Put up with it.'

The man on the table nodded. He was back to his battle with pain. He did not mind that, but it was the pressure within the lung and, seemingly, the whole chest cavity, which was so different from anything he had previously known. The new is frightening. He fought to stem the fear. The sister at the other table kept looking at him, keenly. He noticed, amidst the struggle, that she was slim, short, and blonde. Some fair hair had escaped from under her cap. He decided the blue eyes were strong but tender.

Another doctor came up to the table on which he was lying trying to cope with his breathless experience. This man's eyes were kindly, but his expression firm. He nodded briefly to the major, and cupped something to Denny's face, covering the nose. 'Just breathe quietly,' he said, 'and begin to count.'

Denny tried not to suck at the rubber cap over his mouth. He wanted to be out of the maelstrom of pain

and breathless terror. He fought to breathe normally, but in fact he gave way and was gasping in lungfuls of the anaesthetic. His counting was dropping to mumbling; he could hear that. Then he felt the pressure ease, the pain dying away. He knew the last moment when there was no anguish. He could not, as he wished to, shout out his relief. He knew that to his dying day he would never forget the cessation of pain, and the incredible wonder of normality, a body without agony, a mind without conflict. He wanted to shout for joy, but suddenly he was not there.

HE awakened slowly. He saw the white ceiling of the ward. A male orderly was standing up there, next to the ceiling. His eyes were looking down at him. They were quiet, grave, and calm. Denny thought that was good. He said something, and knew it was being drawn out, painfully slow. The orderly was nodding. He gave him a sip of water. Denny went back into no pain again.

Next time he woke there was pain underlying his consciousness but not disturbing it. He decided to lie still and not to disturb it. He turned his head and saw a fresh-complexioned Tommy in the bed on his right. He stared for a time, not talking. When he turned his head the other way, he saw an Indian soldier. He knew the man was badly wounded and afraid. He turned his head upwards, looking at the plain white ceiling.

Late that night the pain returned. It was coming, not only to him, but to many. He could hear the groans. He watched the nurses quietly hurrying to

where the groans were uttered, and after a time the noises ceased. He wondered at that. He hoped the sufferers had not died. The next day the Indian died and they covered him with his own sheet. Later they came and took him away.

Not long afterwards the bombardment began. The whole building kept shaking with the successive impacts of shell-fire. His leg had been placed on a platform splint, and that shook with the building. The pain built to a high intensity. He gripped the inside of his lips with his teeth. He knew, according to the tradition of his family, that one did not cry out. There was no point. One had to make friends with pain, even though it was the enemy. One overcame its opposition by accepting it. One came to terms with it. So he accepted it.

After a time the planes came, and they dropped bombs. Doubtless there was a large Red Cross on the roof, but the bombs still dropped. They shook the ground around the hospital, and the wards themselves trembled. The leg shook and the pain renewed itself. Like the bombers above, it came in successive waves. Sometimes he felt he would be engulfed.

There were other forms of pain. One of them was hunger. He felt he could eat now, but all each received for the eating were two Army biscuits, hard and dry. Rations were short. There was, marvellously enough, a cup of cocoa. His body craved fluids but they could not be spared. The only water supply lay in the swimming pool outside. The water system had long ago ceased to function.

On the third night he was restless. He watched the sisters tiptoeing around. One of them came and

flashed a torch on him. Her voice was gentle, enquiring. 'Not sleeping, soldier?' she asked.

He could have smiled at that. Who could sleep with such pain?

'I'm OK,' he said.

She peered at him, lifted the sheet, flashing the torch over his leg. 'When did you have your last needle?' she asked.

For some reason her question was important to him. 'Needle?' he asked hoarsely.

She nodded. 'For the pain,' she said.

He shook his head. His eyes were dry. The pain was mounting. 'I've never had anything,' he said.

She talked sharply, questioning him. Maybe she doubted him. Yet it was not that. She was angry that he had been three days without a needle.

'Maybe it is because I had so little brood,' he said.

She shook her head, still angry. 'I was at your operation,' she said, and flicked the light onto her face.

He saw that it was the blonde sister. Now he wanted to cry in her arms. Instead he said, in a dry voice, 'I didn't know we were given anything for pain.' He was remembering the needle withheld from him as he was on the table.

The sister's right hand went into her pocket and she took out a hypodermic. It was wrapped in something white. She rubbed his right arm, above the elbow, just below the shoulder. He felt the prick of the needle. She put her hand on his forehead. Then she bent down. 'Don't move,' she said. 'It will soon work.' She left him.

So he lay there, thinking about her and the needle. Then something began to happen, something which,

along with the gulping of the anaesthetic, he was to remember for decades. The pain began to dissipate. Slowly but beautifully it began to diminish, and finally it was gone. Had he not been drowsy, he would have wept. As it was, he felt a glow of kindly warmth. In the place of pain was tranquillity and serenity. What was more, nothing mattered. Some lines he had once learned by heart from Keats slipped back into his mind:

*My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains,
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.*

His last thought was, 'When pain dies, then all is beautiful.'

THEY were not there much longer. One day the soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Guard came to take over the hospital. They were curt, abrupt, but reasonably kind. One man surrendered his water bottle to Denny. He and the patients on both sides of him shared it, somewhat greedily. They were also given needles and prepared for the journey. It was not all a nightmare, but much of it was: lying on the floor of a different hospital for twelve hours, and then a doctor, angry, finding him unattended, and resetting his leg, and ordering a needle.

It was the needle which made it tolerable. He looked forward, eagerly, to the prick of the hypodermic. He dreamed continually of the drift into unconsciousness and the escape from pain.

At one time he was aware of some drama going on. He heard the cries of a British medico protesting against the removal of the patients who were in a critical condition. Vaguely he knew they were pointing to him and others around him. He knew he and the others were all badly wounded. With a wry smile he remembered the word 'mortally'.

After the drama, the sisters came. They came to each patient and pricked an arm, giving a needle. He felt the peace of it, and drifted off. When he awoke, he saw them standing there with trays of food. He could not believe what was on those trays. There were peaches and cream, plates of raisins and sultanas. There was rich Christmas cake, full and fruity.

He thought it must be a dream. After meagre rations they were now being fed like kings. It was not that he could eat much, for the pain would recommence. No sooner had they eaten than there was another needle; then another. He lived in a drowsy world of unreality where consciousness was almost gone, and where pain had been utterly annihilated. There was dreamy incomprehension, but he preferred it that way.

What he did not know until much later—indeed, a year later—was that they were being drugged to death. Each hour the sisters came, and there was deep pity in their eyes which they tried vainly to conceal. He mistook the pity, thinking it was for his pain. In a way it was, because the staff had reckoned they were as dead men. A move to the prison camp would kill them anyway. So they took the soft and gentle way, the dreamy euthanasia that morphine induces;

a quiet and painless way of slipping out of the anguish of a lost war, an intolerable pain, and all the hopeless questioning that it involves.

Until a year later he was not aware that, of his group of nine wounded, only two survived the morphine. He, Denny James, was, of course, one of them. Before he came to know that, the needle had captured him. In the terms of later years, he was hooked!

IT WAS those lethal doses which had enchained him. Being guileless, he was innocent of the truth. He had not dreamed he was a prisoner, not only of the barbed wire and the curt little guards, but of the needle which had killed his pain.

What he did not know was that he was receding from reality. The fact was that around him reality was grim. That he knew. He looked at it with a sense of horror. In action he had been to the forefront. Nothing had brought a deep fear to him. True, he had sweated on the night of his wounding, but that had been a psychic anticipation of the action to come. In himself he had never faltered. He was always a halfstep ahead of reality. Now he lingered. He was slipping behind it.

In his good moments he would try to cope. In the ward he was encapsulated by the noise, the surgical smell, the groans, the suffering. He saw the hopelessness in some eyes and the steady determination in others. Rumours would come of black market practices, or internal rackets, of fighting and competition for life. He knew immense changes were taking place in his fellow soldiers, the men with whom he

was a prisoner, but it was the pain which confronted him most of all.

Once, he had complained about it to his grey-eyed surgeon. This was a man of his own race, who understood him. A hand which had saved thousands of bodies rested gently on his. Years later he still felt the warmth, intimacy, and strength of that touch. What he was not prepared for were the words which the surgeon uttered. He said simply, 'Pain is a great gift.'

He had thought on that for days, and finally asked the medical officer what he had meant. The man had shaken his head negatively. 'I really can't explain,' he had said. 'Leastways, not yet.' His smile had been a trifle mysterious. Again the reassuring pat of the hand.

He watched men worn down by pain. One man, a seemingly strong man in action, began to lose his grip. Denny knew his pain must have been fairly minimal—his wound was so small. The man was caught in the grip of an attitude. He was hurt more in his person than in his body. He saw fate as an alien and threatening thing. Finally, he died of bitterness and misery.

He himself knew the short cut through pain: morphia. They had given him morphia every few hours when he asked for it. Now the supplies were lessening, and they lengthened the periods between administering it to him. A soldier who had no need for it was taken off morphia, and his complaint was loud and bitter. One of the orderlies winked at Denny as he gave the complainer a needle. Later he whispered, 'Distilled water, mate. Nothing more.' Denny could not find it in himself to laugh.

He dreaded the day when the supplies might cease. All day long the pain in his leg was with him, and only when the morphine was given would it cease. The surgeon explained that scar tissue was gripping what was left of his main nerve. It would always be so. 'You will have to learn to live with it,' he said, 'but that needn't be very difficult.'

There were many pressures, and he tried to handle them. At the same time, he knew something in him had weakened. Something was being lost. That made him uneasy, but he preferred not to take up problems and wrestle with them. His day-long dream was about the coming of the next needle, when the pain would cease. The lack of food, the knot in his stomach, the desire to eat a full meal—these were all with him—but somehow the thought of pain ceasing transcended them.

THEN it happened. One evening, following the meal, the surgeon held up his hand for attention by all patients and orderlies. 'I regret it deeply,' he said, 'but after tonight there will be no relief for pain. There will be no pain-killers. Our supplies are dwindling rapidly. We have been helping you for quite some time, but the worst for most of you is over, and you will all have to learn to live with what you have.'

After that he went around, placing his comforting hand on the men who were his patients. When he came to Denny, he said quietly, 'This is the best thing that could happen to you, son.'

Denny looked at him with amazement. He shook his head, but did not trust himself to speak.

He watched them later as they rubbed his arm with the wet cotton wool. He felt the needle plunge into the flesh, and lay back, still as death. He gave everything to the drug. After a time the whole world and its problems fell away from him. Behind it there was the faint awareness that this would be the last time, but he would not let himself believe that. Within this drowsiness he must not be troubled.

He woke towards morning, and called to an orderly. When the man came with his lamp, he said hoarsely, 'I must have something. I'm feeling queer.'

The orderly looked at his watch. 'It's eight hours since you had it,' he said. 'We were expecting this.'

Denny said fretfully, 'Expecting what?'

'Expecting you to feel uncomfortable,' the orderly said. 'You are going into withdrawal.'

Denny had never heard the term 'withdrawal'. He did not know what it meant. He felt extremely irritated. A deep and heavy anxiety was settling on him. Something was terribly wrong. He gripped the side of the bed, sensing impending tragedy. His mouth opened in compulsive yawns but he could not sleep. 'Get the surgeon,' he said. 'He must come.'

The orderly stood beside him, feeling his pulse. He was ignoring the plea for the surgeon to be brought. There were cries from other beds, and these irritated Denny. He knew that some of them did not have severe pain. The tears came to his eyes unbidden, and they seemed to run down inside his nose. He felt a deep, fierce grief. Streams of sweat were running down his body. 'Get the surgeon,' he said from between his gritted teeth.

The orderly kept holding his pulse. 'He won't come,'

he said briefly. When Denny gave him an agonised look of astonishment, he said firmly, 'He knew this would happen. He said we had to see you through.'

Other orderlies were coming from the duty room. They were holding on to men who were writhing on their beds. Some seemed to be in ceaseless rigours, the beds shaking.

Denny gasped, 'Quick, get me something! I'll die, you know. I'll die!' The indifference of the attendant troubled him. He felt his muscles aching, and his whole body trembling. 'Oh, my God!' he cried, 'I'm dying.'

The orderly shook his head slightly, and said with some sympathy, 'That's how it seems, but it will pass.'

The tremors increased, and the tears. The sweat poured down his body, and the pain was intensified in his leg. He dreaded twisting too much because of fear of moving his leg in the splint, but his control was failing. He knew he would be screaming soon, like some of the others. He fought it, as he had fought nothing else for some time. Suddenly he was vomiting, retching with dreadful nausea, but unable to draw anything up from his contracted stomach. Another orderly came and tried to help him. He said gently, 'Relax, if you can. It's better that way.'

It was foolish to talk about relaxing. His muscles seemed to be twisting as though a giant hand had them in a merciless vice. He kept wondering where the surgeon was, thinking it was unfair. He beat his trembling hands on the mattress and cried. The tears flowed.

Somewhere in the midst of it he was bewildered. He knew he had been a man of will, but here he was

craven, crying out for help. He suddenly knew there was nothing he would not do to get the drug. 'Oh, my God!' he said to the first orderly. 'Just give me a little. Just something.'

There was a huge ball of fire within him. Every part of him ached as his body convulsed and twisted and turned. The orderlies stood beside him, holding a hand, trying to soothe him, speaking calmly, as though he were a baby. Part of him hated them; another part cried cravenly and brokenly to them. Even the pain of his leg seemed minimal against this dreadful invasion of his dignity. He felt disgust at his own servility, a victim of the drug which had once been his most willing servant.

THE Island dawn came quietly on them. The gaping window apertures let in the light, and for a moment sanity seemed to have returned. They were giving him water to prevent dehydration from the sweat, but even this he would vomit. At times he did not know whether he was putting on an act, playing to them to get their sympathy, or whether he was genuine, the plaything of these terrible happenings in his body and mind. He was horrified to think his actions might be his own, springing from his will.

His own breathing frightened him. It was rapid, and his heart was pumping away, fluttering. After a time, his sight seemed to fail, but then in its place were the most terrible scenes. Colours came and went, and also shapes and forms. Sometimes the anxiety returned, pinning him even more heavily to the bed, and yet his body protested, trembling and

shaking, sweating and twisting. Pain was one long thing stretching from his head to his feet. His body twisted, his arms flailed, and with difficulty the orderlies kept him from tearing at his leg. He wanted to shift the splint with its extensions, and toss it away. He wanted to strip, and run naked through the ward, out into the night where there would be no pain.

He sobbed as the day went on. There was no relief. One time he saw the surgeon and implored him, but then the surgeon disappeared in a brilliant vision, and after the vision came darkness. When he came to consciousness, the surgeon was gone. Denny was begging and pleading with the orderlies—different orderlies. One of them was very young. He had tears in his eyes. A spirit of cunning gripped Denny, and he

'urged the attendant to get him some morphia. The boy shook his head. 'It's forbidden,' he whispered. Denny felt a million nerve-endings were quivering, bringing intolerable pain to every area of his flesh. It was as though a million demons had visited him with pinpoints of burning fire. He knew he was on the edge of being totally demented. His eyes pleaded.

When the boy went, he could not believe it. He returned, not with a needle, but with a tablet. Denny shook his head. If it had been a needle he might have believed, but even then it could have been water.

He became cunning. As he shivered he said, 'No good. Must be morphia.'

'A morphia tablet,' the boy said shortly.

Hope flickered for Denny. He grabbed the tablet, thrusting it into his mouth. The boy gave him water in a pannikin. He swallowed that with hasty, bubbling

suckings. Then disbelief gripped him. He almost bellowed at the boy, 'It isn't morphia!'

The older orderly said sharply, 'Shut up, damn you! He's done his best.'

He felt his dignity had been taken away in one deceitful act, and his pride came screaming to the surface. 'You tricked me!' He didn't know whether it was a trick or not. The younger orderly was watching him from a distance, deeply troubled. Denny's pride reached to the bottom of his belly, and he retched wildly. Later he never knew whether it was his own act, or part of his illness. But he felt purged when the tablet was vomited up. He spat with anger, and the older orderly eyed him coldly. He let the rebuke roll over him. Pictures were flashing before his eyes.

Afterwards he could not recall the incidence of the events, the passage from one to another. Each element seemed to overarch the other. He knew the most terrible demeaning, the most horrible pitch of degradation. He ceased to be a man. One minute he was a quavering, whimpering body, the next a victim of blind forces which twisted and pulled and turned him until he cried for quick release. Death could not be worse.

ON THE third day he saw the surgeon clearly. The older man was seated on his bed, holding his hand. He had no idea that three days had passed. It had been a sad century, an eternity of suffering. His body still ached, and the nausea was not gone, but something like peace was beginning to settle over him.

He looked up at the medical officer. He saw quiet

sympathy there, and his tears began to flow. He could not understand the tears. He simply knew that an immense tiredness was over him. Desperately he wanted this fatherly man to be with him. He felt sorrow welling up within him for the loss of a man. 'Don't you go,' he whispered.

The surgeon spoke. 'It's just about over.' He smiled at one of the orderlies. 'The goose pimples are gone,' he said.

Denny looked at the surgeon, and then at the orderly. He was bewildered.

Now the surgeon was talking to him, giving him dignity. He needed that. Once he had endured pain, but in this maelstrom of suffering he had become craven. His self-esteem had slipped away. He dreaded having to think about his failure.

The surgeon seemed to read his thoughts. 'Don't worry, son,' he said. 'Everyone acts like that. It's part of the action. It won't happen again.'

After that he slept. His sleep went on for hours. When he awoke the surgeon was there. This puzzled him. An orderly brought him a meagre ration of food.

'You can eat now,' he said.

Denny kept looking at the surgeon. 'Why did you stay all the time?' he asked.

The orderly said, 'You slept for hours. The major went, and he is on his rounds again.'

The major nodded to the male nurse, who went, sensing that he should. The surgeon turned to Denny.

'Everything will be new,' he said. 'You have been in an unreal world. You have been there for a long time. Now you have emerged.' His hand rested lightly on the leg in the splint. 'Do you feel the pain?' he asked.

Denny nodded. There were still traces of tears in his eyes. 'Yes, I do,' he said. Then he thought about it. 'It's different,' he said. 'Somehow I can take it now.'

The major nodded. 'The pain isn't any less, but you are more Denny than you were.' when his patient looked puzzled he smiled. 'Denny, son, all life is in front of you. You can be part of it now.' His words were real. In another man they would have sounded preachy.

Still Denny did not comprehend. He heard the major's voice talking. There was reassurance in the tones, and occasionally he caught not only the words but the thrust and import of them. Gradually his mind was grasping what was being said. He was remembering the drift of his personality towards a senseless and destructive atrophy of his being. He had crept away from reality, from the pain of mind as well as of body. Now he was having to face it all, again.

Before, he would have wanted the needle. He realised suddenly that the needle had become his life, the slender god that held his peace within itself. Now he was wanting the life out there. He was still puzzled. As yet his understanding was only partial. Yet what the major knew was what he had once known. He remembered the night of his running, and the running of others. Maybe it had accomplished little, but they had run towards the action, not from it. Their spirits had been indomitable. He remembered the night when the blonde nurse had pricked his arm, and the pain had faded.

In his leg the pain was present. He knew he would like it to fade. Then he remembered the surgeon had

said that pain was a gift, a priceless gift. He frowned, puzzling over that.

'There's always pain,' he told himself. 'But life is worth pain, worth anything.' He thought about it again. His mind was very tired. He scarcely knew he was talking aloud, but the surgeon heard him say it. 'It's worth everything!'

He felt the strong, gentle hand on his, and gripped it. Small tears had come back, and he closed his eyes against them, or to contain them.

He was aware of the life which had returned, the old strength of will, the goodness he could know, the goodness epitomised in the quiet man sitting on his bed.

HE KNEW he never wanted to return to that world he had been in. In no way dared he opt out of true life. He knew that the world about him, at this moment, with its noises, its emotions, its rumours and its cruelties, was not easy. In it, without doubt, was raw hatred and inane selfishness. He had seen things in war action that he would never forget. Here, in this prison camp and in the surgical ward itself, he had met pain and suffering in new proportions. Much of it had shocked and terrified him. Yet this was the true world. This was where man lived—for good or ill. Also it was not all evil. Much of it was graciously good. There were men like the surgeon. You didn't have to be bitter about the bad, and you daren't be judgemental. Somehow he could accept it now, even though he could not agree with it all. Many things he would have to work through with this tired mind

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of his. Even so, something of contentment was stealing over him. One part of him felt the rising of his spirit, the renewal of his mind, the new power of his will. The other part—his body—was intolerably weary. He surrendered happily to this part of himself. His eyes closed, his breathing became regular, and he slept.

After a time, the major stood and nodded to an orderly, who slipped the mosquito net over the still body. He nodded again, this time to himself. His head was slightly bowed, but his eyes were clear. He walked quietly out of the ward, into the strong sunlight. Once or twice he muttered to himself, still nodding his head. Later he shook his head, but his eyes were very much at peace. He knew that he *knew* what life was about.

‘Inside there,’ he thought, looking back at the ward, ‘there is another also who begins to know what it is all about.’

He nodded again, this time peacefully, and went on his way.