



The Lion on the Road

Geoffrey C. Bingham

Troubadour Press Inc.

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The Lion on the Road

A Variety of Short Stories

Geoffrey C. Bingham

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Foreword

THIS collection of short fiction is somewhat different from previously published volumes. In a way it is experimental. I have always maintained that stories should be entertaining. Almost everyone loves a story, but some draw the line when the stories become propagandist, or try to point out some moral. That sort of approach spoiled stories for us when we were young and our teachers used to say, in effect, 'Now, children, the point of this story is . . .' Of course, stories teach us something. It was the way heads of families and elders of tribes taught their cultures, inducting the young into ancient wisdom. Song, visual art and literature have helped to mould us in our various cultures. Most of us are fascinated by the stories that come out of our own culture and put us in living touch with the past. At the same time, contemporary writers of yarns like to show how the culture is developing in the present and what it may be moving towards in the future.

In this sense entertainment is not merely escaping from the problems we face daily, but is a way of coping with the present, even seeing value in it, and perhaps learning something useful. I have taken a few stories out of Hebrew history because, for certain reasons, this is not an area many of us explore. We shy away from what we call 'religion', and, perhaps, rightly so: religious people are often uncertain people, and even dark in spirit. They are searching for

something in a world which often does not seem to make sense. In many ways they are like philosophers who seek to rationalise humanity and the universe, but who seek to do it without referring to any deity. There are so many people, who would not call them-selves religious, who are—to use the modern term—‘looking for something’. My last batch of short stories *Laughing Gunner* had no religion in it, but it won the 1993 Christian Book of the Year Award. The judges said it spoke to all who seek to understand the nature of human beings in a difficult world—that mixture of the best and worst in us all. I have been gratified by the way it has been received by those who would see themselves a long way from religion.

Going back over some of the old stories of Hebrew history, I was struck by the authentic nature of them, and their value for our age. I was also impressed by the fact that we have carried bits and pieces of them into our language and thought forms. Take for example, the story called ‘Oh, Jezebel!’ Jezebel represents to us a hard, yet seductive, woman, seeking to win people by her feminine wiles. How wrong we are! She was one of the most powerful women listed in the Hebrew chronicles, and as a woman of another culture made an impact that lasted for generations. Her end was appalling, but her story needs to be retold in the modern idiom.

‘The Lion on the Road’, the title story of this book, has fascinated me for months on end. To write it as a ‘religious’ story would be to miss the dynamics of mystery. Someone has said that a mystery is a puzzle for a man to solve, but for a woman it is something to live in. A story that lacks mystery or simply treats it as a puzzle does not easily grip the mind, or—for that matter—the heart. Anyway, I include these old

stories, and trust that the experiment will have some success. The remainder of the yarns follow my usual line and pattern. I hope that the new and the old, together, prove entertaining in the best sense of that term.

The Chaos and the Calm

‘ARE THERE any great men?’

The question was running over and over in his mind like a refrain without music. It kept repeating itself as though a voice from somewhere other than himself. Yet it was himself asking it, repetitiously.

It changed its form. ‘Is there just one great man?’ he kept asking.

He had not asked, ‘Is there any great woman?’ He had always thought that all women were great, are great, will always be great. Maybe that was because he was young, idealistic.

But then he had watched some of the hospital sisters having a good time with the officers. It was not that he was envious of them—the officers. It was just that he wanted women to be pure; to keep pure.

Once in Malacca Military Hospital an Army nursing sister had come to minister to him, and he knew she was pure. He knew also that she thought highly of him, and of life.

He had wanted to know her, but he was not an officer. He was just a private. He had not wanted to know her physically for at that time his mind did not run in those lines.

The men called him an idealist, but they said that without venom. Later when he became a sergeant and led them on bivouacs and training exercises they had not minded that he was different. He didn’t think

he was different, only normal. If different, then only by comparison.

He wanted all to be great. In the orderly room he saw the ambition men can have, from privates to colonels and upwards. In action of war the greatness suddenly came out. There was greatness at Mersing, and greatness all down the line as they had had to withdraw to Singapore Island, and much of it was just in the humour. The humour was the way of hiding greatness and just letting it appear to be normal.

His mind kept up the tattoo, 'Is there a great man?' 'Are there any great men?'

His mind was also crashing gears. The romance was gone: the romance of war.

He wondered how he had ever conceived of war as romantic. The conception lay in the history of his country; the idealised Aussie; the exalted Anzac along with the idealised Tommy; Gallipoli and all that; the Light Horse regiments; doings in the West-ern Desert; the cavalry; Flanders and all that.

There had been men doing heroic deeds. Simpson and his donkey. The Unknown Soldier and the eternal flame.

At the moment it seemed empty. Just unreal. A mockery. A sneering mockery from some dark cynical place.

He had seen the long lines of the Chinese fleeing across the causeway to Singapore. On the Island there had been two streams of people—one going north, one going south. Really there was nowhere to go, but that was the way the main road had run. The refugees had possessions stacked up in panniers and bamboo baskets. Their eyes held fright or they had dulled to no feelings. Everyone numb. Black eyes

smouldering or black eyes dead. Hair lank from no attention, the face and the clothes beginning to be blackened by the soot of the smoke from the burning oil-wells. After a time whites of eyes staring from weary faces. All becoming faceless, without expression.

The men with him had kept their eyes swivelling as the Jap Zeros wheeled and poised in the skies. Just the single bomb being dropped here and there and then everywhere. Zeros wheeling and suddenly diving with the death shriek. Death to the confused Chinese, Indians and Malays. Also to the weary soldiers of all breeds. They had come from Great Britain, India, Nepal and down south—from Aussie-land. Some of them were very, very young. Most had been untrained, unblooded. Now many of them were blooded. The ambulances with the Red Cross on them were carrying their loads, but the Zeros had no thought for Red Crosses which were, in fact, becoming black with the oil soot.

They had been fighting—he and the men—up near Bukit Timah and the Japs had broken through with their harsh cries and endless chatter of crackers and the strange musical yammering of their ma-chine-guns.

Even then the two streams of refugees were going both ways on the same road. Darkness of burning oil was blacking out the bright tropical day.

He had seen the Indian regiment sunken in despair, then numbed as though soulless. He and his men had been pressed back towards the city. There was nothing much you could do with so little ack-ack fire, and skies empty of Allied planes but filled with fighters and bombers that bore the insignia of the Rising Sun.

One by one he had lost the men. They had almost tumbled Tony into an ambulance when shrapnel from a bomb had torn into his back. Gerry had gone back to find Les and they had seen neither again. The last two men of his Section had wanted to turn north, but there was no future in that. Everywhere he had heard cries of 'Every man for himself!' which had been a warning and a self-saving justification. The group security had broken down. The spirit of the jungle was breaking through.

There was looting of course, but it was dispirited. There was nowhere to take what you had taken. Things that looked good in the great emporiums looked like trifles in your hand. Cameras, portable typewriters; even jewellery. He had seen some of the men leering over it. There were looters of all races, all armed services, as also civilians. The civilians looked the meanest but they had the most delight. The others were trying to buy pride by getting possessions. It was an ancient instinct and he hated it.

The shop he had turned into had shattered glass and his heavy army boots scrunched it as he walked. There was blood, too, on the glass and on the floor and on the walls. He did not know how it had gotten there. His weary mind did not care.

He wanted a respite from the weariness of weeks. Retreating men feel heroism draining from them but their training in heroics keeps them hoping—hoping deliverance will come from a sky suddenly filled with promised Allied planes or anti-aircraft teams with blessed Bofors thumping into the bellies of the circling enemy planes. When there is none of this and the birds fly upwards on the jungle edges and the bombs fly downwards, hope is frittered and the spirit grows angry. So there is little sleep, little

time for it. So much to be done. Even in retreating. One has to inspire whilst cynicism is beginning to eat as an acid. Morale requires a constant high rating until the smile becomes fixed and stiff on the masked faces.

He knew the surrender was only hours away. Frantic men—officers and other ranks—knew that with a sickening certainty. Some had rushed to the wharves to commandeer vessels and boats and ships of any kind. Men had fought their way on to leaving vessels with the last desperate use of their bayoneted rifles. The degradation of self-saving had eaten like a quick cancer, and pride had died with the surrounding terror. He did not know that he had been critical and angry. He had just turned away with despair. None of his men remained.

He was lonely in a city crowded with wounded and dead, and the fleeing living.

He was in a shop which smelt of condiments, of soya sauce and curry powder and the curious sweet smell that invades things Chinese. Things Indian for that matter. Just Eastern things.

Broken packets of powders were scattered on the floor. When he looked into the room behind the shop he saw no one. They had all gone out into the blackening smoke and the swirling despair, and their cries had been muted by the falling, blasting bombs.

He knew there was nothing left. Death might come, but that thought he shrugged off. He felt no disloyalty in thinking nothing would happen from Churchill and Great Britain. He had seen the crates of Spitfires lying on the wharf, untouched. Too late to assemble. Botching in the highest places. Shattered

morale where the top brass was assembled. Liquor aplenty and men crowded into the YMCA, and bodies being tended in the cathedral. Long rows of beds. He had seen them and felt envious of the medicos and the orderlies.

The tattoo was in his mind. 'Are there any great men?' Maybe they were up there at the cathedral or in the YMCA, or maybe just where they were dying unattended. His mind was confused with smoke and death and defeat, but his spirit kept crying out for sensibility and a way through the morass of strange human actions. Of course he had seen greatness. He had even had his own moments of that, but the heart seems to take so much and then is in peril of dying, even though the body lives on.

The smells were in his nostrils, of eastern condiments, of scented tea and of acrid coffee all tumbled together on the floor. Blood everywhere but no bodies. Just desertion of the normal way of life. The shopkeepers gone, and no more the clatter of the mah-jong pieces on the tables at night and in the early morning. The laughter and the triumph were silenced forever, even if in this very street the Jap guns were ceaselessly yammering their ruthless song of terror.

It was then he saw it, the bundle on the floor. It was a wonder he had not trodden on it. It moved, and he felt his skin crawl, though not with terror. The flap of a covering opened and a small hand emerged. It was a hand so tiny that he marvelled. There was a pink forearm and a dimpled elbow. Then there was another hand, and both were waving, almost plaiting themselves together.

He went forward, and two eyes shone up from the crimped cloths. They shone into his eyes, and his heart thumped. He leaned forward, gently. He looked down into the eyes. They smiled, and the features crinkled into a smile.

He found his own heart fluttering. His pulses began to race. There was a gurgle, and a laugh. Every-thing else around him died. In him all things died that had been killing him. His spirit began to inflate. His nostrils swelled. His own eyes shone.

He reached out gently to take the baby. Its little arms waved at him and he lifted it with the wrappings of cloth. It felt warm, and the eyes and features held no mark of terror. He remained gentle, although he wanted to hug it fiercely to him-self. Somehow his own hope lay in the chuckling mite.

He looked around for something to give it. It was not its moment of hunger, but its moment of sociality and it naturally expected his care. That did not alarm him. He had never nurtured babies but had seen others who had. A vagrant tin of condensed milk lay on its side. He lowered the baby to the floor and went for water. He opened the can with the end of his bayonet. He took water from a clay pot under the sink. He found a cup and rinsed it. He mixed the water and the condensed milk. Then he soaked his khaki handkerchief in the cup. He lifted the baby and placed the corner of the handkerchief in the tiny mouth.

There was still laughter in the large black eyes. They looked up at him. The tongue jibbed at first at the handkerchief, but then it began to suck. He could even hear it as a sibilant sound against all the other cries and noises of war.

It lay in his arms, and sucked on the khaki handkerchief. Each time he would soak it in the milk it would look up at him and his movements.

The tattoo was gone from his brain. The anger and frustration had died. He had ceased asking questions about greatness. Somehow its mystery lay in this little bundle of cloth and warm flesh. How that was so he did not understand, but he knew it was so.

The black eyes kept him fixed to their gaze, and he was quite contented in that. Quite contented.

Grandpa's Treasure

'CHEATER' Simmons used to dawdle ahead of me when we were on our way to school. I was skinny and he was chubby. I was thoughtful and a bit dreamy but he was always alert, always quick to understand everything. I would arrive slowly with answers and understandings. I envied Cheater, and he knew it.

We called him Cheater because he fudged when we played marbles—'muckers' we used to call the game. Cheater had blue, clear eyes that always looked at you coolly when he lied or cheated, and there was nothing you could do about him. Sometimes we called Cheater, 'Simmo', from his name, Simmons, just as I was often called 'Dawko', or 'Dawky', my name being Dawkins and my given name being Henry, though they always called me 'Young Harry', my dad being 'Harry', the same as my grandpa and his dad before him.

Take, for example, the unspoken law of 'smugs after second bell'. It meant that in the wonderful game of marbles it was a free for all after the second bell went: anyone could grab anyone's marbles. In those days when the second bell went at lunchtime all play ceased in our Primary School. We had to rush to get to the classroom. First bell meant 'Prepare for second bell!' You were supposed to stop all games, pause, and wait for the second bell. The second bell started the rush to the classrooms. 'Muckers'

or 'Marbles' was a game that had you in properly. You scarcely heard the second bell. Then it was that Cheater would come in like a bull scattering marbles as quickly as he picked them up. He had his eye on your best, too. If you know marbles, then you know some of them are very precious. The master-marbles are—so to speak—loaded, very heavy, dead to a cluster of marbles in a small ring, and just about as good in a big ring. We used to play both 'big ring' and 'small ring'. Even now, as I talk about those games, I feel a bit queer. I have an involuntary shudder and even some goose bumps.

So Cheater would fill up his linen bag with our muckers, and rush off, not caring about the indignation of the other children. We had a kind of understanding that no one touched your marbles until you had first go at them after second bell. When you panicked and ran to get to the class on time then it was open slather for those who risked it and stayed. They would be late in to the class, but they would have precious marbles in their pockets. Most people liked Cheater but I think some of them never forgave him for rushing their favourite marbles. But then Cheater was a strong person. Later on he became an estate agent, had a second-hand car sales yard, and things like that.

As I was saying, I always dawdled on the way to and from school. Cheater was always a yard or two ahead of me, his gaze on the gutters to see whether anyone had dropped something valuable. That often happened along our highway. Once when Cheater was absent for a day I found five shillings in small money, scattered in the weeds of the unkerbed gutter. That meant a lot to me. I burned with pleasure when I realised that my grabbing companion had

missed out. My mum told me it was all right to keep the money. The police wouldn't want to find the owner of five shillings. To me five shillings was a treasure. It bought untold muckers, and 'Boys Magazines' and the like.

This day Cheater was ahead when my eyes caught sight of a pocketknife. I let out a cry and Cheater was quick to see it. In a flash he was on it, but I had got there first. He tried to wrestle it from me.

'You let me have that,' he said. 'I got to it first.'

'I saw it first,' I said, 'and its mine.'

'You should have kept quiet,' he jeered. 'First in, first served.'

'Finders, keepers,' I said in our kid's jargon. We had pretty strict laws as kids. Cheater never worried about laws. He was above them. For this the kids disliked him, but he kept in with them by a system of bribes. He would shout them to lollies and liquorice belts. The kids were not above a bribe, but they disliked him all the more because he tried to keep in with them that way.

Normally Cheater was stronger than I was. What he didn't know was that for years I had wanted a pocketknife. I wanted one until it hurt. My four brothers each had one. I was not considered old enough to have one without cutting myself. My dad had said that. They just made fun of me when I watched them using their knives. They would peel an orange, or skin a pussy-willow branch to make arrows, or just throw the knife at a target for the fun of it. They enjoyed it most when I was watching, knifeless.

So I badly wanted that pocketknife. Cheater was not going to let me have it. 'Finders, keepers' didn't work with him. Nothing worked with him in which

he lost out. So he pressed down hard on the knife with a strong, chubby hand. My hand was pressed into the gutter. He was going to get it, but I was grinding my teeth and thinking, 'Over my dead body.' Well, it could have been that, so to speak, but I upped quickly and rammed my right elbow into his left eye. He let go of the knife with an outraged cry.

'You stinker, Dawkins!' he shouted. 'I'll kill you for this!'

'You and who else?' I asked. I had grabbed the knife and it was in my right-hand trouser pocket. It lay there, strong and heavy.

'Why you!' he screamed and came at me with his fists doubled up.

This was where Cheater had made his mistake. Because I was skinny he had judged me to be weak. I had never fought him when he smuggled my glass alleles and especially the marble agates after second bell, but that was because the unwritten law was 'smugs after second bell', even if most of us didn't agree with it. The smuggler had something on his side—a law for his conscience. This time Cheater didn't have anything going for him. What he didn't know was that in the evenings our dad would get us boys to fight bouts with each other, and I was all honed up on straight-lefts. A straight-left is deadly because it is not a natural hit: you have to learn it. You shoot out your left arm, straight as a die, but you give it a twist as it lands. We used to prance around the lawn practising this punch, feinting at some imaginary opponent.

So in two seconds Cheater had received a deadly straight-left on his plump nose. He howled with anger and drove at me like a young bull, head down. Our dad had said, 'That is when you use the

uppercut.' I did that and nearly cracked my bony knuckles.

Cheater staggered back, his nose bleeding over his white shirt, and his eyes red with anger.

'You can keep your lousy knife,' he snarled. 'Its rusty, anyway.'

In my triumph I shouted, 'Sour grapes! You're mad 'cause I can beat you!'

That got to him, and he was ready for another charge, and then thought better of it. To my relief he gave a sorry grin. He used some swear words my mum had warned me against, but I felt he meant them well.

We walked on towards the school, kicking the blue metal gravel at the side of the road.

'Where did you learn those punches?' he asked me after awhile.

'From my dad and my brothers. We box a lot.'

He looked pretty forlorn. After a time he said, 'D'you think you could teach me boxing?'

I felt for him because he was asking a favour of me. We walked on, and I was wondering whether it was a good thing to teach Cheater Simmons boxing. He must have read my thoughts and dropped back to walk with me. Traffic wasn't much in those days and we always walked on the side of the road.

'Tell you what,' he said, 'I'll give you my best connie agate.'

I couldn't believe that. Best connie agate! The one with the crescents in it. Crescents made marbles special. There was a kind of magic in them. They could even split a glassy in two, on occasions. Glassies were not manufactured marbles. You got them in the tops of lemonade bottles but they were classed high in the marbles' range.

'Fair dinkum?' I asked him.

He nodded. 'Dinky-di,' he said.

He had blood on his hand, not having a handkerchief. We shook, blood and all.

We spent the rest of the time talking about straight-rights, straight-lefts, uppercuts and whether you were southpaw or regular. Cheaters' eyes gleamed and I realised something I had never known before. I had a real friend! Cheater may not have been all that popular, but now he was my friend.

We reached school just as the second bell was ringing. We rushed in to the classroom. Cheater had plenty of blood on his white shirt, and some on his hands.

Miss Cheeseman looked horrified. 'How did you get that nose?' she asked. She was a nice woman, young, blonde and gentle. She always sniffed when she was perturbed. She sniffed a lot at us both.

Cheater wanted to say he had always had 'that nose', but he chose the wise course. 'Hit my nose against the top of a paling, Miss,' he said dully.

When she raised her eyes at that unlikely yarn he nodded with his cool, blue eyes as innocent as a new dawn. 'Skinny Dawkins here, he gave me a lift up to get some loquats hanging over the fence. Real beaut loquats they were, Miss,' he said. 'Then me foot slipped and down I came, a real cropper.'

Miss Cheeseman looked straight at me, because I didn't have cool, blue eyes like Cheater. I would always go red even if I hadn't done anything wrong. I found lying very difficult. I managed to give a shy smile, trying to conceal the truth. Miss Cheeseman gave me the once-over. I trembled a bit. I always liked her because she seemed beautiful to me, and not like other strict teachers.

Also I kept my partly skinned knuckles under the desk. Anyway, she wasn't looking at me as though I had done wrong. She just knew I was an untidy boy by nature. I always arrived untidy at school, though I was tidy enough when I left home, what with my bow-tie, clean shirt, belted shorts, gartered socks and polished shoes. Every afternoon my mum would sigh when I got home, socks around the ankles, elastic garters somehow lost, and my wild hair wilder than when I had left in the morning. Often I had lost my bow tie. My dad was always at me for kicking the toes out of my shoes. I was terrified of him, but a law of kicking always took hold of me when I was walking to and from school. I loved kicking gravel, even though I knew my dad might punish me for it.

After a time Miss Cheeseman began to tell a story and we knew the worst was over. At lunch time Cheater fumbled in his marble-bag for his special conie agate. He made quite a thing of handing it over to me, a sort of ceremony in front of the astonished kids.

'Skinny Dawkins and I are friends,' he said. He winked at me. 'Dawky is my best friend. I hereby give him my most famous marble.' In those days of the Great Depression 'freebies' were just about unknown.

There was a sigh of awe as he handed it to me. He ran a large circle on the asphalt with some white Education Department chalk. We began playing marbles, putting out our worst muckers into the centre of the ring. Cheaters' conie agate was magic. I couldn't miss when I fired it, but then I had learned on lesser marbles, and had a good eye for distance, along with a near-perfect aim.

'Spam! Spurt! Splonk!' The marbles scattered out of the ring. Some rolled near the edge, and as it was my go again I made them ricochet out of the circle. The first bell went and I was filling up my linen marbles' pouch made for me by my sister Wendy, out of a flour bag. When the second bell went we all watched Cheater to see what he would smug. He smugged nothing! We all rushed into Miss Cheeseman's class with happy faces. She seemed pleased, said nothing and set us to do special writing in our copybooks.

On the way home Cheater walked alongside me.

'Sorry I said the knife was rusty,' he said. 'It's just about brand new.'

I took it out and showed it to him. It looked brand new, and my heart thumped at every look at it. I even let him hold it. The old Cheater would have rushed off with it, shouting, 'Yah! Yah! Yah!' but now he was my friend. We had trust in each other.

Part of our homeward journey was spent getting away from the girls that tried to walk with us. We shot off into Frenchman's old orchard. We called it 'old' because it wasn't in use. Anyone could eat the soft fruits in summer and the oranges and mandarins when they ripened. The present Frenchmans never minded.

Under one tree we both had secret hidey holes. We called them our treasure holes. In them we put all kinds of things we found, pretending they were very valuable. We made sure no one discovered them.

Cheater, whose real name was Charles, just like mine was Henry, asked whether I was going to put the knife in the treasure trove. My eyes narrowed at

that. I wondered whether he was going to double back later in the day and pinch it. It seemed as though he wasn't, because he said, 'I'd never do that, myself. Someone will be watching and hey presto! they will pinch it sure as eggs.'

I felt warm towards Cheater and was liking the feeling when he said quietly, 'What about your grandpa's treasure?'

I stared at him. I had never heard that Grandpa Dawkins had a treasure. I said so.

Simmo—as we sometimes called him—nodded his head. 'Fair jonnicky,' he said, 'Grandpa Simmons reckons your grandpa has a nest egg, and he ought to know since they are friends.'

I knew birds had eggs in nests but had not heard about nest eggs before. Simmo laughed. 'Your grandpa is a rich man.'

I nodded doubtfully. 'Sometimes he gives me a sovereign.'

Cheater looked sad. 'My grandpa never does that,' he said with envy. 'Just think how many connie agates and good muckers you could buy with a sovereign.'

'About a thousand,' I said recklessly. 'Pity is my mum gets the gold coins and puts them away for when I am older.'

A cloud came into Simmo's eyes. 'When my grandpa dies I bet there will be no treasure. When your grandad kicks the bucket I bet your family will be rich.'

A new world opened up the day I found the knife and we both became friends. Mostly it was what Simmo had said about Grandpa that made me change my mind about the old fellow. He became a

new kind of person. I watched him wherever he went. He had a tool shed up the back of our place where he kept his gardening things and carpentry tools. He would saw and hammer and make things, and I loved the smell of fresh plane shavings, of turpentine and French polish. Now I became especially interested in everything he did.

One day I asked my mum about Grandpa Dawkins. 'Has he really got a hidden treasure?' I asked.

'Where did you hear that?' she asked me back.

I didn't want to betray Cheater so I kept silence. Then I saw a grin in her face. I battered her around the hips. 'Come on Mum,' I said, 'tell me about Grandpa's treasure.'

She looked around to see if anyone was close by. Then she bent down and whispered. 'You are right. Grandpa reckons he has a treasure, but then he will never let anyone see it. Some of us think it is gold nuggets from the old Bathurst mines. His dad was a fossicker up there after the mines closed, but he went away to the Boer War and did not come back.'

'Great-grandpa?' I asked. 'He was a soldier?'

'In the Light Horse,' she said. 'A great man in the saddle. Not that I ever saw him, of course.'

'And he fossicked for gold,' I said with awe and wonder. I could somehow see the shiny nuggets stored maybe in a polished box, or in a tin trunk. It would be small, of course, not large like pirates' treasure trunks.

I used to follow Grandpa up to his shed, and sit on an old kerosene case, and let my eyes wander around the shelves and things.

Grandpa always had a secret grin. I would watch him while he mended shoes. He was good on

resoling and heeling shoes and boots. He had a knife sharp as a cutthroat razor, and the leather would curl away from the blade as he shaped it to the sole or the heel. A competent man was my Grandpa Dawkins.

On winter nights we would have a great fire and I would curl up on the rug in front of it. My brothers were too big to do this, but I think they envied me.

One night without thinking I suddenly shouted. 'There it is! In the middle of the fire!'

My dad was not one for free speech. Children were supposed to speak only when called to do so. So he growled out, 'What's in the fire?'

'Grandpa's treasure chest,' I said. 'Look at it there in the middle of the coals.'

No one got down to my level: it was too undignified. They just stared a bit. Then my mum sat beside me. She peered into the coals. 'Bless my soul!' she said. 'So it is. It's Grandpa's treasure trunk!'

I didn't know whether she was having me on or not. At first Dad was scowling at the nonsense, but then he grinned. Grandpa was snoozing over in one of the large lounge chairs, and Dad raised his voice a little.

'Grandpa! They've got your treasure trunk in the middle of the fire.'

Grandad woke with a start. 'Treasure?' he asked. 'What treasure?' Then the words came to him clearly. He rushed towards the fire and looked in. Of course he saw nothing and wagged a finger at my father.

'Henry,' he said, 'You didn't oughter say such things. Treasures are not to be joked about.'

I caught on quickly. 'Then there is a treasure, Grandpa?' Grandpa lost his mild anger. 'Oh, there's a treasure all right,' he said. 'My old man gave it to me. He left it in his will and when he was killed at Mafeking, my mum told me where it was hidden. So I got it.'

He lifted his creaking body to full height and stared down at me. 'I've a mind to give it to you just before I die.'

There was a chorus of protests from the rest of the family.

'Give it to Young Harry!' they said astonished. 'Why give it to him? He's so dumb.'

Even my favourite sister, Wendy, called me dumb.

Grandpa shook his head. 'Harry's not dumb,' he said. 'He just plays it quietly. 'You'll find that out one day.'

He grinned at me. 'There isn't really any great treasure, and don't let anyone tell you my dad gathered nuggets in his fossicking. There's not that kind of gold in my treasure trunk.'

Dad said quietly, 'What kind of treasure is there then?'

Dad's father just winked at him, and made his way back to the lounge chair. After a time we heard him snoring. I looked into the fire but the treasure trunk—or whatever it had been—was now gone. I was sad about that, but beneath the sadness was a great excitement.

The family used to look at me a bit differently after Grandpa's talk about me. Sometimes we joked about the treasure, and even Grandpa joined in on that. I think we all thought it a joke. I did, until the day Grandpa had his first heart attack.

I was the one who saw it first. I was up in the shed with the old man, and he was working away, planing some wood, and the wood shavings were curling away from the spoke, when suddenly his face went white, like a fresh sheet. Then it began to go blue, and Grandpa was groaning terribly. I rushed to the house and Dad and Mum came up and they hurried next door where there was a phone, and after a time the ambulance came.

Grandpa was still: unconscious I think, when they took him away. In those days the ambulances had a clanging bell. I was terrified as they clanged up our drive out on to the highway. The house was pretty quiet and we waited for days to hear what had happened. After some days Grandpa came back to us in Dad's car. He looked pale, and a bit frail, but he was recovered.

I used to go into his bedroom to see him, but he was too tired to talk. Nothing like the thought of the treasure ever entered my mind. I loved the old man. He had been in the First World War and had been in the Light Horse on the Western Desert. He only ever told us the funny things like most of his mates did who came to see him and who shared the old jokes with him. They would all roar with laughter and sometimes slap the table with their hands.

Now the fun had gone. He looked tired; too tired to talk. One day, however, I found him fresh and bright. His eyes had their old shine again. I still did not expect him to talk, so I sat quietly looking at him.

He did talk but in a tired voice. 'Harry,' he said, 'I want you to have that treasure we have all joked about.'

I was stunned. Then I thought he might be wandering in his mind. I had long ago thought the

treasure a joke, as much a joke as when Cheater had talked about it.

He was watching me, and his eyes seemed to grow even brighter. The treasure is up in the shed,' he said. 'It's under the floor, the dirt floor.'

He seemed almost too tired to talk. 'I hope you won't be disappointed. Just remember, Harry, I like it. I was disappointed when I first saw it, but you may come to like it.'

I was too near to tears to think about the treasure. I knew Grandpa was dying. He seemed precious to me at the time. I had never forgotten how he told the family I was not dumb. I knew I was not dumb. I loved him for that, but I loved the old fellow for himself.

Two days later Grandpa Dawkins died quietly in his sleep. It was my first experience of death, but it was all gentle. All the old Diggers from the Returned Soldiers and Sailors League gathered for the funeral, and some of the younger ones were the same age as my own dad. They heaped on the flowers, and over the open grave they blew the 'The Last Post' and 'Reveille'. It was all very beautiful to me though quite sad too.

The next day Dad helped me dig up the treasure from the earth floor of Grandpa's tool shed. It was there all right, in a tin lunch trunk. Just a small one. Dad would not let others be there when I looked though they were busting to do so. I was a bit disappointed. There was just a bag of marbles in a large leather pouch—about fifty of them, I think. They looked a bit old-fashioned against the marbles of our day. There were 'Boys Magazines' and Comics, with names I didn't know, and they looked so old.

My dad was very sympathetic. 'Not much there, son,' he said, 'but then Grandpa treasured them.'

I remembered Grandpa said he had been disappointed.

My own dad gave a bit of a quiet smile. 'So much for nuggets of gold,' he said, but he was not joking. He gave me the little trunk. 'Keep it son,' he said, 'and give it to your own son. It would be good to pass it down the line. Grandpa certainly loved you.'

That was a long time ago. It was before I grew up and became a farmer, and then joined up in the Second AIF and went off to war, to the same desert where my grandpa and dad had gone—the same Western Desert. After that I fought in New Guinea and we came home to a heroes' welcome. I went back on the farm after I married one of the enlisted nurses. Over the years I met Cheater again, and he was very prosperous.

We only had one son, but we had three daughters. My son Harry—Harry Junior—liked the land a lot, but he preferred history. That is how we lost him from the farm. He spent years learning to be a history lecturer in a University. He still is, but in the past few years he has been probing our family history. He is very proud of the line of our descent, and has been asking many details.

A week ago he came to me asking more information about the family.

He said, 'Aunt Wendy told me a story about Great-grandpa having some buried treasure. She said something about Grandpa and you digging it up but that you both never told the family. They all thought it must have been a sad joke or you would have told them what was in it. They said it was supposed to

have been nuggets of gold from the Bathurst field, but they knew it wasn't. They guessed it must have been a few old trinkets.'

I remembered Grandpa hoping I wouldn't be disappointed, and that I was. I also remembered my own dad telling me to pass the treasure on to my eldest son. I had kept the small tin trunk in my study, stuffed away in a cabinet with some of my own war mementos. I showed the war mementos to Harry and he became quite delighted.

'Would you leave these things to me when you die, Dad?' he asked.

I put them into his hands. 'Might as well have them now. I'll write down their details for you.'

Then I grinned. 'Now to see Great-grandpa's treasure,' I told him.

I felt around for the old tin lunch box. Harry's eyes widened as he saw it come out. He could scarcely wait to see what was in it.

'Don't get your hopes up,' I said. 'Nothing special.'

I thought of my great-grandpa of the 19th century who lived to fight in the Boer War, but who died there in South Africa. My throat thickened a bit, and I felt a strange pricking at the back of my eyes. At the same time I was a bit ashamed to show the papers and marbles to my brilliant University lecturer son, Harry Junior.

When he saw what was in the tin trunk his eyes rolled. He had a deeply reverent look in his eyes. He let the marbles roll out of their old leather pouch, and he shook his head. I saw tears in his eyes.

'Over a hundred years old!' he said wonderingly. 'What a treasure!'

Then his eyes fell on the old 'Boys Magazines' and antiquated Comics. He handled them with awe, and

very, very gently. After a long silence he looked into my eyes.

'These are worth thousands of dollars,' he said. 'I'll bet no magazine or comic collector has a set like these.' He shook his head as though he could not believe what he saw. The collectors would give a mint for these.'

He turned to me. 'Dad,' he said, 'these are very precious. They need to be handled well.'

He looked at me again. 'I can get a buyer for these without any trouble.' His eyes narrowed. 'Would you sell them?' he asked.

'That's up to you,' I said, and my voice thickened. 'They're yours, son. Great-grandpa and Grandpa both would have wanted you to have them, and I do. As for selling them, you will have to make up your own mind.'

It was clear that Harry didn't believe this was all happening. I saw the sheer delight in his eyes, and wondered how our family patriarchs had worked this all out.

For a moment or two I forgot Harry, Great-grandpa, his son, and my dad. I was again seeing myself fighting Cheater for a pocketknife, and the blood that came from Simmo's nose. I also saw the little treasure trove that we had made in old Frenchman's orchard. I remembered the time when Cheater had asked me about Grandpa's treasure, and the fire in which I had seen it glowing like a vision in the hot coals.

The pricking was there again, at the back of my eyes.

'You better put those things back in their trunk, Harry,' I said. 'Maybe the trunk will be of value too. I don't know.'

He said nothing but handled the marbles and the pouch, the papers and trunk with gentleness.

The last thing I saw was a large glowing conch shell, the biggest I had ever seen. In its depths were marvellous whorls of all colours, and little crescents like tiny half-moons and I thought I saw Grandpa kneeling in a dry-as-dust country schoolyard, knuckling down 'screw-tight' as we used to call it. I guessed that there were others in those days just like my friend Cheater, and they were breathless as they watched the boy aim at the centre of the large ring and then scatter the 'muckers' with his own prize one.

All I was waiting for was the sound of 'second bell', but it never came. Maybe my last thought was not profound but I knew that—apart from games—there were really no smugs in life after second bell. What is a man's is a man's, and he will always want to pass it on to his sons or whoever he deems is worthy of it.

The Unclever Clown

IT WAS John Wainwright's first night at the Clowns' Club and he felt a bit of a clown himself. He wondered, foolishly, why he was sitting there. Right now he should have been sitting at home in a fit of the miserables. The trouble was the TV had become futile. The house was empty without Marion and the kids. He had no like for alcohol or any kind of drug. He had always been too sensible for those things, so he had little to stimulate or sedate him. Food didn't figure because he had always been a bit athletic. It was years since he and Marion had danced and he was too sore in his spirit to go to places where they danced publicly, having virtual strangers for partners.

He had agreed with Trevor Sampson to attend the sessions for divorcees. Trevor hadn't been prior to their going together, and for a few nights he felt it might offer him some hope. He could certainly relate to the folk, and was heartened to know he wasn't the only one baffled by divorce. Even so, it was like salt in his wounds, and since his wounds were deep he talked with Trevor about dropping the class. Trevor was one with him: he wanted to drop it too.

Then Trevor suggested the Clowns' Club. 'Can't do any harm, Johnny,' he said. 'It will give us both a break. We can go somewhere for supper afterwards.' So here they were at the Club. When he looked around he saw a group of serious men and women.

None of them looked like buffoons. He could not imagine them in clown's clothing nor did they look as though they could handle too much humour. There seemed to be more fun and joy at the Divorcees Care and Share Group. At least folk joked there from time to time, even if sometimes a trifle cynically.

The chairperson was a middle-aged man, fine features, hair greying and slightly receding. The other leader was a bright-faced woman who seemed quite competent, and would nod from time to time when the man talked about clowning to new members.

'We have an introductory handout here,' he said, holding up a single sheet of print. Maybe it will surprise you a little. I am sure it will whet your appetite for the experience of clowning. On the back is the program of classes for the first term. That's all about make-up, clothes, artificial devices for changing you and your shape, and some principles for going about your fun.'

The woman nodded a couple of times. John wondered at all these things that went to make a serious person into a buffooning clown. He found his interest awakening.

Someone was passing around the term sheets, and still there were no jokes, no smiling, but the group was relaxing, especially as the newcomers eyed the list of classes.

Trevor said out of the side of his mouth, 'This is going to be good.'

John nodded, but said nothing. The woman was taking the place of the chairperson. She was talking about the history of clowning. Whilst what she was saying was evidently not new to the older members,

John and Trevor listened, entranced. Clowning went back at least to Greek and Roman times, and probably before that. There had been court clowns who were there to amuse the kings, queens and members of the court. Some of them were great mimers and acted in plays. They were the fun of farces, the tra-gedians in comedies, the jesters in serious situations, comedians who brought through sense when idiocy was prevailing; they were jokers in the card pack as well as in otherwise dull situations. The art of clowning had developed through great figures past and present.

John suddenly became excited. Life for him had not only become painful since Marion's separation from him, but it had become dull. He was beginning to think it had always been dull. Come to think of it, he had not brought much merriment into the marriage, and the family had rarely exploded into laughter.

'Clowns are generally very wise people,' the woman was saying. 'They are very discerning. They see the craziness of the serious people in high places. They are really acting cartoonists, spelling out in joke and observation the stupidity of the brilliant. Today we have rubber figures. These clown about the men and women in leadership, but the living clown is more powerful. His other facial movements, body language and the rest help us to laugh at the idiosyncrasies of others because they are in ourselves.'

As she spoke John realised that the great names such as Pierrot, Harlequin, Joey (Joey Grimaldi), Francois and others were the names of actual people, and each had a set fashion in clowning or jesting. Special clothing had been invented for each type of clown, special routines and the like. Both John and

Trevor were on the edge, of their seats. Their decision was clear: they would go for clowning.

When the meeting broke up for supper they filled in entrance forms, paid their dues, and went to Trevor's place for further supper and chatting. Something in them was released. The underlying pain of their divorces was temporarily dulled. They began to fancy themselves as new persons, liberated from the tragedy of life. They actually found themselves joking; something they had rarely done since their boyhood friendship. They had come to marriage seriously. Both imagined their former wives peering in at them, seeing them in uproarious laughter and humour and being astonished.

Stimulated, they shook hands. John made his way home merrily and scarcely noticed the emptiness of the house. Trevor lay back, laughing, but inwardly he was wondering whether he could make it in clowning if he hadn't made it in marriage.

They never missed their Tuesday nights. They lapped up every word of teaching. Lectures were never dull. They bought books on the subject but were warned not to buy clothes or cosmetics. These would come later. Neither of them found female companions in the class. Personal relationships were fairly detached all around. People were concentrating on their new art.

Gradually the mystery of it all unfolded, and persons made their particular choices. Some liked circus clowning, some wanted to be happy satirists, some buffoons, some entertainers for children at parties. Some were drawn to the brilliant miming of white-faced Pierrots who looked as those almost dead.

It was when they were being made up that John felt his first great release. He could not believe what he saw in the mirror. The serious-faced person he had known all his life took on a new character. He felt his blood flowing in as though in new veins. He seemed to have a new heart. He found himself taking to the make-up woman with a humour that was for him quite incredible. He looked across at Trevor who had decided buffoonery was his speciality, and the two spoke as though they were strangers meeting for the first time, though knowing all the while that they were not. They seemed to trigger each other off into fresh fits of fun and laughter. They knew the trick was never to laugh but to keep a straight face. Of course the paint helped them here. The expression was not their own but then they somehow made it theirs, as though this was the way they had to go.

At nights John would imagine himself to be in a children's party. He avoided thinking of Marion and Tina, Timmy and the diminutive Mavis. He was allowed to see them monthly but for the time being he had no heart for this since it was still a heart which would bleed at the sight of them. Once or twice he visualised himself being invited as a clown to one of their parties, but dismissed the idea.

Trevor was going for the big-time stuff. He was looking to do media work such as TV advertising stunts, and miraculously enough he made it. John would look at him on the screen. He was mesmerised. He knew the voice of a clown changes when his clothes and situations change. It was not a disguised Trevor he saw on the screen, but another person.

In his first experience of being a party clown, he expected to be like jelly, melted in terror; however the opposite happened. Once he was in his clown's clothes and had applied his own make-up he felt an incredible jubilation within. It was as though he was released from his old self, and was another person. The more the paint was applied, the more he changed. He was filled out a bit with padding, his clothes were loose and he felt a marvellous freedom.

He filled the boot with his clown's gear, sat in the driver's seat and went off to his first assignment. When he was ushered in, the children set up a great noise, clapping and welcoming him. With his own family he had always felt tense. Here he was totally free. He got out his little stool and placed his large bottom on its ridiculous seat and of course, as planned, it collapsed. He tried to set it up again, and the children shrieked as he turned it all ways but got the same result.

Rolling across the carpet as a padded ball was a bit difficult for his years but he had practised it often and hard, and it succeeded. More shrieks. Even more shrieking with his bowls of water which always seemed to jump and soak his tunic when he was holding them down. Some were old tricks, some new, some even his own.

When his part of the show was over he sat with the parents and ate party food. It was expected of him. The children were now at their games and their parents chatted with him. He was surprised how highly they regarded him. They talked to him, too, not as a fool, but as a wise man. He found this difficult to believe. He just talked on and they seemed to want to hear his ideas.

It was then he realised the value and worth of a clown, jester, buffoon and a professional fool. The clown never makes fun of anyone but himself. He never seeks to be satirical so that it hurts, critical so that it cuts, but he is out to entertain. All people like to be entertained. They do not like to be laughed at, but they love to laugh at themselves in another. It releases them from their own fears and dread of a loss of dignity. There is no word or idea in the whole gamut of human experiences that the clown cannot make to be the source of joy and fun. His very sadness releases others from theirs.

What delighted John most was not that he was disguised or hidden but that a new 'John' was released from within him. He imitated no clown: he was one on his own. He also discovered that when he talked to others it was not a repetition of what others had said, but what he had always thought, and had been unable to express.

In former days, when they had been a family, Marion had looked at him with expectancy, calling for his personal comments and decisions but he had generally frozen with fear, too timid to voice his real ideas. So, gradually, he had withdrawn. The children had given him the same looks of expectancy but after a time their demands had ceased. So he had become a lonely and separated man. Marion and the children had made their own world, together.

One mother told him, 'You could have been a great teacher of wisdom if you had not taken up clowning.'

His enamelled face gave no expression. 'We are all wise inside, if we only knew it. Clowning gives me freedom to share what is there.'

The woman had looked at him curiously, and he saw some wistfulness in her eyes.

A journalist wanted him to abandon his new profession and be a political columnist. He would have liked that, but he was still an accountant when not a clown. Clowning was his hobby and he loved it because it released him into another life. He was gradually coming to believe it was releasing him into his own true life, a life that had been frozen within him, deadened out of fear.

One day it happened. He had never thought it would but it did. He was welcomed uproariously at a children's party and Marion and the children were there. The host family was unknown to John or he would not have been there. His whole being tightened at the sight of his former wife and the children. They looked across at him with delight and joined in the uproarious applause that greeted him. He relaxed as he realised they had not recognised him. In his relief his antics were better than ever, and he knew it. He tumbled, he cavorted, he sat on his ridiculous stool, swivelled, crashed, reseated himself, and rolled and righted himself, and all the time his patter went on. He was no silent clown, no mimer, no tragic picture but just a person full of fun, putting himself down and taking others with him.

Then it was all over. The hilarity died out of him. He sipped his cup of tea, careful not to remove any greasepaint. As usual the parents were grateful and talked to him. One of them was Marion. She seemed to regard him highly. He was grateful that his clown's part kept him in voice as a man other than the one she had known. Like all the parents she directed questions to him, and he answered her as

the others. He kept telling himself he was not anonymous, but himself, yet a self she had never known. Being in another role he escaped most of the pain that comes from seeing the wife he had never ceased to love.

He noticed that even her questions held little interest for her as she asked them. She seemed to be distant, absent from the fun. Not so the children. They were rollicking with fun. Perhaps they were glad of his absence. They might even have been making up for it: he did not know.

The shock came when he was invited as a clown to little Mavis's fifth birthday party. In fact he had two invitations. One as Mavis's father, and the other as the clown for the day. For a moment he was baffled by the choice, but decided it would be as a clown that he would go. He wrote a short note to say that unfortunately he was on business on that day and that prevented him coming as the children's father. The reply he received was even more curt than his, and it was tinged with bitterness.

For the first time in his clown's life he was afraid. He thought of sending Trevor in his place and talked to him about it. 'I'm not much good for that,' Trevor said. 'I have another role.'

So he went. He applied his paint thickly. He padded himself more than previously. He tried to alter his voice even more, but the moment he did this he began to lose the new personality that was his as a clown. His nerves in tatters he went to the party. He hired a taxi because he knew they would recognise his car.

He might as well have had no fear, no premonitions of the terrible. If he had clowned well at the

party where he had met them unexpectedly, he excelled beyond even that occasion. He almost forgot Marion had been his wife, Timmy his son, and Tina and Mavis his daughters. It was as though everyone mattered, and not only his own family. He had always thought parties to be boring events, but his mind was changing. He knew people hungered for entertainment, and especially the kind that clowns and jesters could bring to them. Their foolishness somehow made life seem sensible. These clowns had a wisdom they could impart, even if in only small instalments. They pointed to something quite purposeful. The absurd things they did seemed to shout that there was something which was not absurd, but full of meaning. Anyway, that was the way he saw it.

The parents talked with him. This time Marion was hostess so she sat opposite him at a small table, plying him with food and drink. A couple of times she looked up at him, puzzled yet without recognising him.

For the first time in his life he had a conversation with her that knew no fear. She seemed eager to talk, to extend the conversation. When he rose to go she looked disappointed.

'I thought you might stay to see the children have fun in the pool.'

It was an enclosed pool, but outside the house. He had glimpsed it on one or two occasions.

'I guess I must go,' he said, and he felt his own reluctance. She did too.

'Just for another twenty minutes or so,' she said. 'They will love it if you watch them.'

He agreed, and they went on talking. By now he was wondering which person he was. Some of the

old heartache was returning. He asked her about her work, her night course which was to help her in her new vocation. She seemed little interested, and was trying to ask him about his work of clowning.

'It must be fascinating,' she said wistfully. 'You seem so free in it.'

He agreed with that. 'You do feel like another person,' he said.

How was he to know the children had a plan, and it was all to do with clowning? They came rushing up behind him, clad in their swimming costumes and they tipped over his chair. Marion was alarmed, and tried to shoo them off but it seemed that hundreds of little hands were pushing, pulling and dragging the large clown into the pool. Marion was in a new frock she had specially bought for the occasion and it was an expensive one. She moved back from the edge of the pool where the children were splashing all who came near. Meanwhile the poor clown was being inundated with adoring tinies who scrambled all over him. His padding was being soaked, and he felt himself being submerged.

He had no alarm for the event. Indeed he had a rich love for it. He fought valiantly against his cruel oppressors and shouted happy things to them, much to their delight. The cheering was endless, the splashing and the flapping without end. Marion was running around the pool trying to get the children to leave her clown alone. She was in tears.

Not so he. He was dog-paddling with great zest, thumping the pool until waves rose and water splashed on to the parents who did not know whether to be alarmed or delighted. By now his

clown's cap had rolled off, his hair was soaked, and gradually the paint was washing off, streaming down his clown's suit.

It was this which finally sent him into alarm and panic mode. He started peeling the children off him. He made for the opposite side of the pool, trying to hide from Marion. As the paint went, and the clown-suit stuck to him, his new personality seemed to die, to drain away from him.

It was Timmy who first discovered him. 'Daddy!' he yelled.

John looked across at Marion and he saw astonishment in her eyes. Then she seemed in a state of horror and delight, each battling the other.

Tina had heard Timmy's cry and she looked across at the half-clown, half-father. She shot along on the top of the water, almost flying and gripped him fiercely. Timmy was looking at him proudly.

Marion was trying to take it in—this man she had talked with so warmly and intelligently, this man who had attracted her so deeply, and her children so happily. The bitterness divorcees always have within them seemed to be dissolving and she grabbed at it so that it could not elude her. Another force, deeper than ever she had thought it could be was rising within her, and thoughts and ideas were fleeting across her mind. She knew she could love this clown, whoever he may have been, but the dull boring image of her former husband was rising before her.

She marvelled at how many ideas can come to a person in a flash, and then how quickly the strongest can win. She scarcely looked down at her new expensive party frock, straight from the boutique and being worn for the first time.

She gave a half-cry, half-shriek, and she dived into the pool. Adrenalin gave her arms power so that she reached him in a few strokes. Timmy, Tina and Mavis were clinging to him with great pride, and other children were holding back a little, envying their grip of the soggy clown.

For her part she swam up to him, hugged him, clung to him, kissed him time and again, and shared his great body with her children. For moments he was her former husband, and then for other moments a new man she had admired and wanted to know. He too was passing from one of his beings to another. It was all dizzying to them both, and to the children, for that matter.

The amazed party folk watched them traipse into the house soaking wet from the pool, but unbelievably happy as a family. The other children resumed their cavorting, rolling and romping in the pool. Finally their parents called them out, dried them, and then, not being able to find their hostess, they departed.

Now that the guests had gone, a giggling quintet emerged stealthily from the house, making sure no lingerer remained. They were still wet in their garments and with one great shriek they raised their arms and dived again into the pool. Had any one remained to watch, then that person would have thought there were five clowns—a covey of clowns, so to speak—all sporting together like a family of delighted dolphins.

The Shangri-la Connection

I AM YOUNG, but then not so young. You might almost put me in the category of 'mature student'.

I am still at Uni, and I do not want to make out that all wisdom begins and ends with me, though I often wish it did. That is why I listen to others. I listen particularly to my peers for I find them very interesting. Some of them are not brilliant but they seem to make sense. Me? I know these young students are only a year or two or three out of high school. My peers are older than that.

This morning we are lazing on the Uni lawn, and all kinds of remarks are being made. Whilst we sip Cokes and eat a pasty or two, the guys and the girls are talking. They are always talking. They talk the stuff us Uni students have talked for decades, about fat cats running the campus, about how dumb are some of our lecturers, for all their pretensions of wisdom, meaning, of course, that we are bright, if not brilliant.

We are also talking about sex. Every so often it gets around to this. Me? I am generally silent. Part of me despises the dumbness of my friends and part of me admires them. They have the same troubles that I have: parents. I have trained myself to be detached and objective so I see my friends and parents from this point of view. Not always. Sometimes I get

blazing mad with both. I seem to live in another planet where I am wise. I am like God looking down on idiocy.

I wonder why they can't see the sense in things. They keep making things what they are not or else they misinterpret. My parents, I mean, and our family. Life is tidy in the suburbs of Adelaide but I think it is dull. How come my parents are dull? They seem to ask for nothing beyond the security they have. I am different. Often I ask myself a question, 'How come I am so clever, so especially brilliant?' I do not know. I just have to live with it.

Take sex for example. I don't buy all the obsession. Of course I have my fantasies. That is to do with being young and having sexuality by nature, but I have a strange way of being objective, even here. I see couples staring at each other with expectancy that I know will never be fulfilled. I keep asking guys, and sometimes the women, 'What do you get at the end of it all?' and they look at me as though I am a bit twisted or maybe a queer, or something.

I see them move from person to person, or get so absorbed in each other—each other's bodies mainly—that they lose out on being rational. I know the idea of marriage is reasonable, but this day the statistics are against matrimony. One out of three is going to cop out of the bond, and then they go through a ceaseless search to find the right one. I don't know what 'right one' means. I don't believe there is that kind of chemistry that makes 'the right one'.

Another thing they yak about is 'freedom'. They are satisfied with some of the revolutions that have happened like the sex one, the feminist one, the racial and the eco one. They are against discrimination and

all for human rights. They are satisfied that every-thing has changed from what it was. All of this thinking seems dumb to me, real dumb. They also speak against things, like parents, professors, the government. Some are really idealistic. Others are ideological—they see everything through a system of ideas. Some are mad keen to shape everything and everyone up to their ideology.

That is why I often get bored. I sometimes lie on my back and look up at the sky which I really like. Or sometimes I just lie flat on my face, but my head is in my hands to escape the grass and maybe the hay fever we have at certain seasons. So I listen to them.

Today I am hearing all the same things and I am bored. That is until one of the chicks talks about going to Nimbin. Now I know all about Nimbin. Some of my friends have been there. I soften as I listen. I am keen to hear. Nimbin is Shangri-la. It is the end of the world. It is the beginning of the New Age. It is it! It is idyllic, even without drugs. It is smashing. It is escape from intellectual idiocy, and it is true ecology. You can get the dole and do no work, or you can plot out some way of using your life, being interesting. I like Nimbin and this chick who is speaking is beautifully brunette. I have a fantasy but know it isn't real.

I hear all the weird language, the crazy ideas, the stupid thinking. Yet it makes some sense to me. I see one bird—a different bird—just opposite me and her face is glowing. She has been there—to Shangri-la. I think she is not only cute but has a strong body. She is beautifully blonde. She vibrates. She is Nimbin.

I ask her, 'Why come back? Why go for this study thing?'

She nods at that, and smiles, and I think I could like her.

'It's beautiful,' she breathes. Her heart gets tangled up with her throat. She has memories, this one. They are good. I can see that.

'I want to get equipped,' she says. 'I want to go back with some handle. I want to get our ideas out real well.'

I am a bit disappointed. I think she is like the others, fairly dumb.

'Power stuff,' I say. 'You are a reformer. You can't relax.'

She blushes hard at that, and stares at me, and there is anger.

'I just don't want to sit on my butt for ever,' she says. 'I want to do something.'

'Thought the hippie thing was doing nothing,' I said. 'Just letting it come, if it comes.'

'It comes,' she says. 'You are part of the land. You get absorbed into it. You are one with it. Also there is karma.'

I close my eyes at that and roll the other way. I hate ideas that condition your action. This doll is really good, but she is also dumb. She has fallen for the ideas.

When the others have gone, throwing their Coke cans into the trash bin, she comes across to me. She still has anger.

'What have you got against being hip?' she asks. 'What have you got against relaxing, like at Nimbin?'

'Nothing,' I say. I look at her. 'I have nothing against you, come to that.'

I swear I see her colouring but maybe that's from anger. Everyone gets angry. We spark each other off.

I say to her, 'Did you really ever go to Nimbin? I mean to the Farm?'

She shakes her head. 'Only to the town,' she says. 'I used to sit around and listen to them talking, the alternate lifestyle people. I used to watch them with their kids. I would look at the crafts in the galleries. I absorbed it all.'

'Never went to the Farm?' I ask again.

She nods numbly. 'Never went to the Farm,' she says. She stares at me, 'You been to the Farm?'

Of course I have been to the Farm, but I do not tell her that. I visited there in the early days. I realise now the bit of gap in our ages but that does not matter to me. I am not involved in this person. I grin.

I say to her, 'Let's go to Nimbin. Let's go to the Farm.'

She stares, a bit amazed and still angry. 'Just like that!' she says sharply.

'Just like that,' I say quietly. Then I grin, 'Let's go soon, like tomorrow.'

Her anger dies. I think she is beautiful. She smiles a bit. Then she says, 'When exactly, and how?'

'Say six tomorrow, early, and backpack. Get hitches.'

She looks doubtful. 'What about our courses?' she asks. 'This is last semester.'

'Doesn't take time,' I say. 'If it blows out we can get back quick.'

'That is not commitment,' she says. 'You need commitment.'

'Maybe it is commitment,' I say laughing at her.

'Maybe it is just sex,' she says, and I hear the anger again.

Now it is my time for anger. I am surprised how angry my voice is. 'Not sex,' I say sharply. 'That's never commitment.'

She stares back at me as though she's never thought about things this way. 'Have you got bread?' she says.

'Just a bit,' I say. 'Enough to help us on the way.'

'Where do we start from?' she asks.

We settle for Gepps Cross, at six, early, like we had said.

The travel to Nimbin takes a long time. Hitches aren't easy these days. I don't mind walking. I keep tough from sport, and she is no slouch. We get a small hitch to Balranald, and then one through to Sydney. We go through the night with only relief stops and time for fast food. I pay for the truckie and he doesn't mind. She is Sarah who lives between divorced parents and is independent. I like that but feel sorry for her. I have friends in Sydney and we go there. Everything is neat with them. No drugs; they know I don't go for drugs. Sarah doesn't either except for a joint every so often. So we act normal, just like we are back in Adelaide.

North of Newcastle we get a great hitch. This takes us to Lismore. We think it is right to take the bus from Lismore. The road is good to Nimbin. It is just after lunch. The sun is brilliant. Before Nimbin it is like the tropics. The trees are tall, forest giants some of them. There are the high outcrops of rock, all etched as crags. There is something about them like India or that kind of Eastern thing. Nimbin thinks it is just about Indian.

I point things out to Sarah. Suddenly she stretches back in the bus seat. 'You've been here before.'

'I've been here before,' I agree. 'Quite a few years.'

'It always seems along this stretch when you see the tall rocks that it isn't Australia,' she says. 'It's just like Indian temples.'

It does brood a bit, the green country with the cows, and trees you don't see down south, especially in the Flinders Ranges. There they are blue, and the sun is harshly brilliant. Here, near Nimbin, it is a mysterious world. When I think 'mysterious world' then my mind goes cold and slips back to being rational. You have to keep objectivity.

Sarah doesn't press me about my seeing Nimbin years ago. She sits silent and a bit stiff as we trundle around the bend and there suddenly is Nimbin.

In a way it is sleepy hollow. The buildings are old, part of the cow-cocky life of the North Coast. In the full summer it breathes hot and people keep in the shade. The older inhabitants have everything going for them like bowling greens, tennis courts, swimming pool, and the old churches which seem withdrawn from the invasion by brilliant Uni drop-outs. The two worlds have learned to mingle, each a bit uneasy.

They are there, the older hippies and the later look-alikes. Two groups, really. Much the same clothes but not as eccentric as before. Most have Indian garb or just clothes from the Thrift Shop. It is all a mixture. Women drag kids behind them. They go in and out of shops and stores as though looking for something that is eluding them. Others seem just ossified in the no-time of their minds. There is a constant eluding of decision-making.

Nobody is smiling. All are serious or just have the vacant look of drug-takers. They are not dumb these ones. Quite thoughtful really, but they seem to have suspended thought. There is action all the time, but it is going nowhere.

I look at Sarah. I fancy she is a bit slack in herself. Maybe she is puzzled.

'Great place, Nimbin,' I say. 'This is where it is all peace.'

To underline that, a man with a long ginger beard passes us without curiosity but he bows slightly, raises two fingers and bids us peace.

We respond. 'A guru,' Sarah whispers and I hear respect in her voice.

We go into a cafe and order some herbal tea and a rough health salad.

Sarah chews on it all with thought. I wish I could have some fast food. Herbal tea is not my thing.

'It will be better out near the Falls,' I tell myself. I am thinking of the Flinders Ranges and how quiet they are. I am seeing blue acres of Salvation Jane, the red of the Wild Hops and tumbling yellow of the Spring wild flowers. Nimbin is unreal.

Sarah is saying, 'Here you can relax. You flow back into the earth. You are part of the great forest trees. You belong to the land. She is a great Mother. She gives peace.'

My mind gives a lurch. I have heard all this before; said it before, thought it before. Now it is drained. I look across at a couple with two watery-eyed snivelling children. They are grubby but it is right for them. The couple are silent. They are thinking, not talking.

We'd better get on out to the Tuntables,' I say.

Sarah nods. She is off in some place of her own. There is no chemistry between us. That, at least, is a relief.

We are backpacking around the mountain curves. Here and there the bitumen is breaking up. We watch ourselves where it says, 'Danger of falling

rock.' Nimbin Town was no final haven. It has to be out here where the road is leading up to the mountain top. Over the mountain is Shangri-la. I realise I should have worry beads. I should be getting something from another culture, an ancient philosophy. I try out Sarah's idea of Mother Earth. It still keeps looking to me like the white man's dairy country where the jungle has been pushed back to make way for cows, a bull or two and the Blue Heelers and the Red Kelpies.

We are looking down at where they all live; those who have left behind suburban mediocrity in a hundred cities and in dull towns and sleepy hamlets. They have felt the shudders of horror about materialism and the economics of urban living.

So we descend the hills, our backpacks jogging us down the steep slope. Soon we will be there. Not a sliver of excitement in me: not a smidgen. Sarah is breathing heavily. Maybe it is from memories. She has been to fairyland before. She is away from her home and her troublesome separated parents. Mine are not separated. My mother tries to understand but my father is scornful of alternative culture.

'Anti-culture,' he used to say. 'Nothing wrong with what is old.'

It is the old we have been asking for. The time before this time. Life rural and peaceful. Like here, at the Farm.

Sarah is a bit stunned. She is like the proverbial mullet. She is looking up at the gate into the Farm. It has a notice about visitors only staying for twenty-four hours, about looking after themselves in a certain section, and about privacy for the regular residents.

I grin hugely inside myself as I remember the old days.

I am remembering the guys and the girls who used to lie out in the sun stark naked, back to nature, drinking in Father Sun and being enfolded by Mother Earth. No one is lying stark naked. Perhaps 'Slip! Slop! Slap!' has converted them. *Cancer is a killer*. There are some carcasses of cars, stripped and naked themselves, down to the bare chassis. There are a few vehicles of the latest hippies, but the former ones roll past us in Desert Wagons or disposal Jeeps and Landrovers.

The drivers manage the gate and slip past us without a nod. They are still not smiling.

Sarah is not smiling. Nor is she heaving. I think she is remembering the thick turf of the Uni lawn. Maybe she is thinking of the Cokes and the pasties. I do not know. I smile encouragingly.

'Tomorrow we will meet the inhabitants,' I say. 'Tomorrow we will find the wisdom.'

It is not summer, but the late air of the day holds some warmth. We have some night-cover. We find a spot in the Rest Area. We make a nest under a banyan tree near the harsh lantana, away from the other visitors. Perhaps we can crawl under the lantana. I know Sarah is not afraid of me. We have some cans of food, but all strictly non-meat. Even so, one guy opens a can of tuna and spreads it out on sliced bread. I feel hungry. After a time the darkness comes in and we fiddle with torches and sleeping bags. We are strictly close to one another but also miles away. Nothing will happen, not even in our loneliness. Better things must be ahead.

In the morning we travel around. People respond to our greeting. Some even talk to us, but their minds

are elsewhere or maybe nowhere. I marvel at the new homes, the electric cables, the telephones. I have seen things like this in Adelaide and in Quorn. I like the macadamia orchards they are building, and the pawpaws look hip. So do the mango trees. I know all about trees, even these trees. Here and there is a red cedar, planted of course.

The old domes are gone. No longer homes are domes or domes homes. The blending into the countryside is still there. One or two pedal their stationary bicycles for energy in batteries. Some have solar systems. Women hang out rag-like clothing but some of it is good—straight from the Thrift Shop. Patched jeans are still in. Children run to their mothers and hang there.

This man we meet is wise. We know he is wise. He is old long before his time. He knows Father Sun and Mother Earth. He also knows trees have souls. His gnarled hands move across the smooth bole of a eucalypt. Sarah begins to live. She is quivering like she did on the Uni lawn. She is just about settling down to wisdom when the guru unaccountably walks off, ignoring us or maybe he is farewelling us with a low grunt like a feral pig. His wife is calling out about something. It is right for him to go.

Now I begin to talk to Sarah. I begin first to talk about my own trip years ago to find Shangri-la in Nimbin. I tell her about the days when young people were feeling a new liberty breaking through the world. I tell her they suddenly found the older generation dull, unimaginative, materialists, seekers after cash and comfort, conniving at wars to keep the 'have-nots' from getting what the 'haves' have. I tell her about Vietnam, and the sit-downs and the stand-ups, and the cunning of politicians and fat cats. I tell

her about the clever counter-culture language and the hiving off of youth from the family, and the establishment of alternative life styles, and the going back in history to the ancient, the primitive, the soil, the psychic, the old accumulated wisdom of gurus and shamans and monks and the rejection of anything of the Western tradition and its faith.

Not much of this is new to Sarah but she starts her quivering again when I talk about mind-expanding drugs, and Eastern meditation, and reincarnation, karma and the New Age, and the tremendous power that can be released in humans. I talk about the dreams and goals of humanism, and her eyes keep glowing with blue light, and I sense a touch of adoration that is personal.

Then I talk about my visit to Shangri-la, and the very, very good things and the very, very bad, and how the Farm was a place where the disillusioned could come and dream out a better world. I tell her that no one was allowed to make this a better world, that we had to let the earth be the earth, the sky the sky, and the forests the forests. I tell her the good and the bad of those days, the minds that got drugged out, the free sex and the bondage that came with it, not only on the Farm but world-wide.

Suddenly I say to her in plain words, 'There is no Shangri-la here. There never was. There were brilliant Uni drop-outs, clever thinkers, naive meditators, and budding ecologists but the main drive was human ego, as ever it has been. If you can get inside those houses which were once little more than humpies you can trace the history of their thinking.'

Sarah keeps shaking her head which is negative body language stuff, because she doesn't know where to nod, and where to shake. When I show her the

new world of amenities the older inhabitants are building up, she begins to get disappointed. Maybe she longs for a plastic dome, and peace, and time to think and not to think. I do not know. I like Sarah so I keep praising the old hippies and their ideas and dreams, and then I tell her it all had to change, anyway, though they could still keep the best bits.

'When we're young we are always like that,' I say, 'but we have children and they grow up and they watch us to see if we are giving them a new world. They learn something valuable, but they look to how their peers are living, and how they are learning, and what they are going to do. So they don't want it just as their parents did.'

While I am talking I am hiding my feelings about the past. I don't tell her about the anger I had against my parents, and some that I still have. I think this blonde girl will one day be a woman, and even a wise one. Meanwhile she has to live with the ferment. Even I am still living with the ferment.

We go back to the Rest Area, and we sit beside our packs. Sarah looks at me and finds my pity. I think she is wanting sympathy. I have it, but giving will not help. We open another can and share it. Cans seem out of place amongst the paspalum, native grasses and the spreading lantana. She gives a wan smile, and I nod as though I understand.

We pack our things. We stand up, shake and ease ourselves into the pack. We walk past others who are lounging. One of them is saying 'Fascist' about the notices.

As we bend forward, struggling up the hill, Sarah says, 'You would need to be here a long time to understand.'

I nod. I am a trifle breathless. I will leave talking until we are out of the valley, descending towards Nimbin. Even so, I grunt, 'Yes. A long time.'

We know there will be nothing for us back in Nimbin. The hills are hiding the wisdom. The gurus have turned back into men and women. The children are probably running round the hills, laughing and adventuring. This is their place. They were born in it by the Boyer method—a calm welcome into a peaceful world.

Maybe the tribal council of the Farm is meeting tonight. They will talk about their plans to defeat the logging. They will think of what they have accomplished over the years. They are people of the New Age. The old parental control and domination is a generation away but the children do not know that. They feel another kind of control. Some are itching to get out into the fascinating world of action. Perhaps they are reacting against holy meditation and the true Shangri-la. All of this is a pity.

I know it is not the time for sympathy so I speak about the practical thing of getting a room for the night, perhaps at the hotel. We agree on that. Maybe we will have to sleep with others, but high hills are too cold yet for sleeping out. I know nothing will happen. We will go to Rainbow Cafe with its brilliant Indian exterior, painted by the local artists. We can eat well enough. Then we will sleep, though strictly apart, in our sleeping bags. In the morning we will catch the bus to Lismore, and hitch across to Adelaide. Maybe we will take a different route.

I say to her between silences, 'Ever been to the Flinders Ranges?'

She is silent for some time and then says, 'No. Never been there.'

'You'd like it,' I say. 'The hills are blue, and at this t

ime the wildflowers a riot of mauves and yellows and brilliant reds. A few Sturt Desert Peas also.'

'There are sacred places there, aren't there?' she asks. 'Places from thousands of years back, eh?'

'From forty millenniums back,' I say, proud of my special word 'millennium'.

She is a bit wistful. I think she will cry if I touch her gently, being sympathetic, so I desist.

I say, 'We'll be able to finish the semester, now. It wasn't all that much time out.'

I know she has lost a dream. Maybe she should have stayed and settled it for ever.

'I tell you one thing, though,' I say to settle her, 'these hills are magnificent. So are the valleys. Heights and depths. They are grand.'

She nods. She is even closer to tears. I think of her deserting parents and I have a lurch in my heart. I am ashamed that I will like being home with my parents. I invite her to come to meet them.

She turns incredibly blue eyes on me and she smiles and her golden unwashed hair seems to shimmer in the late afternoon.

I keep thinking, 'It was worth coming all that distance for this.'

I begin to think there must be something beyond what my calculating objective mind has been thinking.

I am beginning to think that humanity is a strange and wonderful thing, given that it has many warts and woes.

Adelaide, the Flinders Ranges, Uni and the studies and Sarah are filling my mind, really filling it out.

Nimbin is behind us. Perhaps for ever. Nimbin is numb.

The Shed

I AM IN the shed today—the old garden-cum-tool shed. I have been in it for the past few days. Every so often I have to clean it out, tidy it up, sweep the floor and fill a sack or two for the garbos to take away to the dump. Today I am startled at the memories that keep coming to me. In fact I am confused and befuddled by them. Why should one have memories from, of, and in a garden shed, as though they were of some importance? I do not know. Maybe it is the foolishness you get into when you are in your seventies. No! Do not leave me! Do not think I am descending into senility because I am in my eighth decade. I heard a learned doctor say the other day that only five percent of aged people go into senility, the others imagine it is their fated doom and give way to dullness and apathy. Here am I—Barkus is old and willing, a trifle ancient, perhaps, but able. Listen to my story of the shed. Persevere with this bit of anecdotage. You, too, may reach your seventies and come to respect your garden shed as I now pay reverence to mine.

The shed has stood nigh on twenty years and looks as useful as the day we put down the concrete floor and opened it for business. It was not custom-built but just one that had come off the production line with the hundreds of others—thousands maybe. There is nothing aesthetically attractive about it. It

stands there in its Trimdek iron, its fading Colour-bond, its two louvre windows looking like eyes in a head and the door doing service for a nose and a mouth together. It is long and squat, five metres by three by two and a half, the roof sloping down from the front to the back so the water can run off easily. That is just about it: there is nothing much more I can say other than that it is sturdy. It is just a shed: that is all.

Then why try to tell its story? Indeed, how can a shed have a story? Am I trying to concoct a yarn because my heart likes doing that and my brain is incessantly imaginative? Perhaps: yet my stories have a way of not being written if they are not warranted, and insistent upon being written if they are. I am always helpless in this matter of story-writing. And it is so with the shed—the long, squat, Colourbond, Trimdek object that has faced the dawn in the east for two decades and has proved itself to be no slouch. It has been alive in my mind and heart all these three days. You cannot write a poem, ‘An Ode to a Garden Shed’, but you can write a story. In fact you must.

Back then: I had needed a shed for my garden tools. Until we got the shed, they used to be tucked into odd corners of the house, and were a nuisance. We were not cashed up, and so the idea of buying such a shed was little more than a dream. Besides, we were too busy doing things to warrant a stocky shed of the proportions set out above. Then it suddenly became urgent as my carpentry tools became a nuisance in my study, and things that needed to be stored—like the Vacola Preserving pan and its innumerable jars—began to spill out of the closet under the stairs.

So we bought the shed: somehow we managed the finance for it, and I cleared the ground, using a level, digging out a footing, and getting John my close friend and neighbour to help. He was an ex-Mallee farmer and had plenty of muscle, intelligence and cementing skill. We used the cement-mix people, and worked our trowels from the back and the ends and moved towards the door. John finished it off, and we had a good smooth floor. It was a minor marvel of course, but it looked huge, with all that empty space.

When the concrete set hard we stacked the garden tools, wheeled in the mower, the rotary hoe, and I made a peg board for the carpentry tools. That was it: I locked it against possible thieves, and used it with a certain delight of ownership for many weeks, rather proud that I had joined the suburban stereotype of house owners. Like them we have lawns and gardens, a hobby or two, and a penchant for visiting garage sales and the local Lions Club second-hand Saturday morning sales. So gradually the cavernous gloom of the shed became my Saturday haven. She—my wife, Laurel—had her own bit of garden, and her needlework besides, and insistent interest in our now grown children—and their children.

One of my grandchildren, Rubin, was a great admirer of the shed. Like all other grandchildren he invaded the shed on the occasion of visits from the far distant North Coast of New South Wales. He would stand wide-eyed whilst I used my Black and Decker tools, and he asked innumerable questions above the wail and shriek of the circular saw or drill. I would shout back, or switch off the tool and go into long discussions about this and that. I noticed he was a bit

shiny-eyed. He was fascinated by the life in the shed — birds and that sort of thing.

Once when we visited Melbourne and we had a day with his other grandfather and grandmother, I praised the workshop Will had organised in his beautiful suburban home.

He looked at me and said acidly, 'Nothing to compare with your workshop.'

I was puzzled. 'My workshop? I don't have one. I only have a garden shed.'

He relaxed and grinned. 'Rubin says you have a better workshop than mine, here. He thinks you are tops. Nothing I have or do is as good as what you have and do. You're brilliant.'

Will smiled broadly. 'Except, of course,' he announced, 'for my loud speaker extension from the house radio.'

'Oh!' I looked blank.

He switched on the extension and the cricket came through loud and clear.

Rubin says you have nothing like this,' he said with an edge of pride in his voice.

I was thoughtful. I had not dreamed Rubin admired his Adelaide grandpa. I hadn't known that grandparents could live in rivalry. I also quietly resolved to install a radio in my garden shed; I mean my special workshop.

As I write these things it is with a sense of irritation that I cannot get my writing teeth into this matter of the shed. When I try to put ideas to computer they seem evasive and even trivial, but that is not quite the case. Long ago the shed had ceased to be special. It just became a dumping ground for things of no value. Periodically it would become so choked

up that I would have to have a spring-clean, even if it was in winter or the mid-summer when the iron shed would be vibrant with heat. The shed, so to speak, seemed uncaring, always stocky and without moods as it contained itself in the face of my neglect. Now I will slip into present mode and describe the feelings I have had over the past few days.

For three days I have been tidying the shed, uncovering old objects. For example, that hand scythe that I had lost, is found. I thought the bulldozer must have buried it as we uprooted old stringy-bark stumps. I had looked for another over the years, but no hardware store stocks them any more, and I need to cut a swathe in winter of the pernicious weeds. Nothing else quite does it. Now my hand scythe is found! Eureka!

Also I discovered innumerable hand-forks for weeding and planting seedlings. I used to wonder where they could have gone—so many I lost. Enough: these are minor things, and not the ones I want to describe. Take, for example, this bit of flat tin. I used to make trays for my budgie cages. Budgie cages? Will you believe it, I had forty of them, and all in this shed? I made them, one by one, with my Black and Decker electrical equipment. Boards were sawed and tacked together, budgie breeding nests were made and tunnel holes bored for the nesting birds. Little doors on the nests allowed me to peep into the baby budgies, waiting excitedly for them to feather, and feel their sleek lines and see their glorious colours. New colours too, never seen before in budgieland. I specialised in purples and mauves for they went well with the yellows and the whites.

How could I have been such a sucker for budgies? How could I—a grown man—roam all around our city of Adelaide looking at other budgies, even going to competition shows, looking at prize birds? How could others do this for ten, twenty and thirty years, never swerving from their childish fixation of developing the perfect bird and some new colour? I groan when I think about it.

Droves of kids and adults came to look at my progeny, nodding seriously with me, thoughtful and friendly in their fraternity of bird-fanciers. Looking at the papers for good purchases, doing the rounds of pet-shops—this was much of my life outside my vocation. Today, as I look at that segment of flat tin I wonder how I became so maudlin, my shed just a breeding place for whistling, chirruping, chattering budgies, and I a mature man! Gosh!

Mind you I graduated from budgies to parrots. I sold the budgies and bought a pair of princess parrots, and someone gave me a galah and a yellow-crested cockatoo. My Black and Decker tools whirred and cut and shaped larger nest boxes and helped to fashion the aviaries—dozens of them—as I made fine homes for rosellas, princess parrots, superbs, cockatiels, redcaps, blue bonnets and a dozen other species. The whole place was alive with their cries, their calls, their whistlings and their shriekings. I was a parrot addict, a peerer through aviary wire at my beautiful birds. Some of them became intimate, lighting on my shoulders, feeding from my hand. Ah yes, but the way I infected other human beings into becoming parrot lovers and aviary builders! Why, that on its own is a story, and I refrain from telling it. I spent days helping them, too, to build aviaries. The shed disgorged its endless supply of

shaped nest logs and nest boxes, and the phones were busy telling folk where they could buy and sell and obtain and get caught more and more into the passion for these near-human feathered creatures. I was the victim of a powerful cult, a dynamic obsession.

The day came when I came to my senses, scarcely able to credit my latest idolatry. I closed my manuals and other bird books, I died to my latest foolish fixations, and the parrot cries faded to almost nothing. One or two corellas were left to do their crazy antics and try to revive my old passion. Then they went—one to a dear friend, and the other into the maw of an invading fox.

So you see, a garden shed can tell tales. What other tales can it tell? It can tell of making seed boxes for early seedlings for the hothouse, designed to beat the cold of the Adelaide Hills. Ah yes, but I had become wary. I had discovered the reality of idolatry. You start in a small way, you get hauled in, you are hooked, you become an addict, a slave of your idol. You think about it at nights when you wake, and when you should be thinking seriously about what you are at in life, the images of your passion hover in your mind and even before your eyes.

A vegetable garden—to which most garden sheds are dedicated—can become just another idol. You extend here and there, you widen your horizons and your garden. You visualise tomatoes of a size and sweetness rarely known to humankind. You see your need for a good new barrow to carry just one of your giant cabbages to be proudly shown to all. Who ever grew a potato of that marvellous size, and who could boast three cobs of sweet corn on the one plant? So it went on, and the storage of potatoes took up a large part of the shed.

Then you awoke out of your garden slavery and minimised the area for planting. You came back to sensible reality. In fact you were thinking of making some useful bits of furniture for the house. Mind you, you were no cabinet-maker. You had friends as good as that, but then you could refurbish some piece of furniture you got as a bargain at the Saturday morning Lions Club second-hand market.

And what a place it was. There you had the fellowship of like-minded bargain hunters. Remember the swivel lounge chair you grabbed before anyone could get to it. It had rolled off a truck and the man put \$35 on it, and you were almost breathless with desire. Remarkably enough it was yours and it had a rest for your feet. As though you would rest long enough in your study to read and ponder in its comfort! Of course there were other treasures such as the timber, corrugated iron, old doors, and a hundred other things you had stacked in the shed from time to time. How else could you have built those cages and aviaries and seed boxes and repaired those bits of furniture?

At last you had escaped all obsessions and infatuations. The shed stood there, its history dying in your mind. That is until you used it as a place for listening to cassettes—cassettes of message and music. Some-times you potted with a bit of this and that whilst you listened. Then you made a special set of shelves for stacking the cassettes. Out came the Black and Decker tools again, and you had the satisfaction of creating something whilst you listened to preachers and teachers, writers, poets, artists and savants. Long ago you had had the electricity connected, and so at night you could leave your study, leave Laurel to her TV and embroidery, leave the phone to her and

get away from it all and just sit back and listen. That was life!

Also you were pondering imponderables. You were devising your own stories and poems and even a novel or two. So the shed served you well until the winter came and whistled through the louvres and you were drawn back to your own cosy study. That was about the time you ended your enmity with computers and became a humble learner, and then almost a buff as your writing came to life with this user-friendly acquisition. You were not sure who or which acquired who or that—you the computer or the computer you—but you were glad of the new and easy way of writing.

So the shed was forgotten, shamefully neglected, and it began heaping up its rubbish until even you were embarrassed to put your head into it. Furtively you grabbed a fork or spade, a rake or a hoe, or, head down, you dragged out the tiller, that rotary hoe that had done such service in churning your rich, dark soil made fecund through much humus and rotted animal manures. These were the days when you could look a budgie in the eye and not budge, a parrot beak to beak and not quiver. You could not be stirred into visiting a garage sale or the Lions Club second-hand yard. Now you were normal. You were maturing into a sensible person. Even Laurel admitted that.

Once again your true work was absorbing all your time and thought. Speaking, teaching and writing had come freshly to life. How foolish you had been with your passions and infatuations. Nothing like this must occur again. You had learned the trickery of idolatry and the integrity of sane living. The world

of these other things had died away and you were in your true element. Not that you had ever shifted out of it. You hadn't, but its serenity, its integrity and its essential reality had been dimmed by these other things. Yet in the midst of them you had known true values and fought for them against your parasitic idolatries.

You wondered whether you were a special case. How could you have such high thoughts, good intentions, fine devisings and yet be such a victim for this or that fascination that came to you? True, you worked out that if your primary relationship with the good Deity was clear and complete the others would naturally follow. So you decided that keeping away from idolatries was a sensible thing to do, but to let your devotion and worship flow for that Deity would be the best way of doing this.

A shed can be a retreat for a husband who does not know how to relate fully with his wife, for a father who finds training his children, understanding and helping them, difficult. Hobbies can absorb one's whole life, and whilst they give some excitement and fulfilment they may get out of hand and rule a person. A woman can do without a shed but no less she can have a passion which absorbs her. We all want to be going somewhere and doing something useful and satisfying. We think that that is what life is all about.

But I forget my shed in my ruminations. I am in the shed at this moment. The vestiges of budgie and parrot involvement are all about me. The memory of rats coming to eat the bird-droppings and an occasional snake making its way in to eat the vermin,

and even the birds, comes back to me. The cassettes have dust on them and the ones without plastic covers have been rendered useless. Classical and devotional music has gone down the drain—so to speak. Neglect is the key word in the midst of this mess. Conscience bids me bundle it up for the garbo man and so I work hard at this. No longer are we allowed fires and smoke pollution of our ozone layer. The fires of the past are but a satisfying mem-ory—everything going up in flames that was rubbish! What do I do with broken handles, tools without handles, rope and string tangled together, wire of different gauges equally tangled, and tins of paint now into their third decade? What to do with it all? Use the old fertiliser sacks and bundle it all together for the dump.

Old tools that once did a good job, files worn out or rusted to uselessness, bent nails also rusted, old electrical tools burned out, hinges and catches and clips, and all kinds of things one might one day use—shove 'em all in the bag: get them out of sight. What am I going to do with the old folding chair that was a family heirloom, now well over one hundred years old and which I have never renewed and polished? Leave it there for another day. Bits and pieces of electrical cable, a tin of rusted screws, and masses of bolts without nuts, and nuts that fit no bolts, and some washers John's dad gave us when he retired. The weariness that comes with decision making! How can one shed have so many problems, and how can one shed those problems?

My eye catches sight of a sliver of wood, and also a piece of cement. Relics—would you believe it?—of a sentimental journey up the North Coast of New

South Wales where Laurel and I went to live, farm, and write, after our honeymoon. A riot of memories comes breaking through of post-war days, a honeymoon over and another begun. Writing and success, and growing acres of vegetables, and putting in irrigation to foster them. A welter of new friendships and the first child coming, and the farm animals, and the adventures in new kinds of writing—all brought back to the mind by this relic of our farm-shack and the floor of the cream room in the dairy. How sentimental can you get?

What will I do with the sliver of wood from the house and the last surviving piece of cement floor of the cream house? Put it in the garbo's sack? Never! Polish them both and attach a tag for posterity to ponder. It can be part of the relics of a marvellous life, albeit attended from time to time with idolatrous intrusions and encrustations of curious ambitions and various visions.

Everything redundant is gone, and a lot that was not redundant. The shed is clean. The floor is swept of years of dust and the white concrete is seen again. Old paint tins are despatched: only the useful remains. Twitterings and whistlings and chatterings of budgies are only in the imagination, and the dignity of parrot beauty is alive only in the memory.

Below the garden shed stretch the gardens fecund with vegetables. The corn is tasselling, the tomatoes are reddening, the onions are burgeoning. The ferny green of carrots is waving in the gully wind, and the parsnip tops refuse to bow. Lettuce, beetroot, silver beet and all brassicas are martial in their defined rows. The soil-tiller stands waiting to be triggered into life and to curl the furrows of fallow soil.

I look back at the shed and am proud of its tidiness. When it is not neat and clean it is always on my mind. Now I have attended to it. I look at it and think I will use my can of bronze-olive paint to refurbish it. How fresh it will then look. I will tidy the weed-grown concrete around it, and give it some honour. I am grateful for a shed that brings so many memories but since most of those are in the garbo's sacks I wonder what visitations of the past can come back to me in its future.

I resolve to do something about the sliver of wood and the fragment of concrete. That is a good memory to preserve. I will go now and tell Laurel that all is clean and fresh again. She will be pleased. John will be glad I have found the hand scythe and the electric sander I thought I had lost or someone had pinched.

I find the can of bronze-olive paint. I choose one of the paint brushes, and having broomed away the cobwebs and dust from the Trimdek cladding, I proudly apply the first strip of paint. I like this: I like sitting on the upturned old four-gallon oil drum, and revelling in the memories that have come over the past few days. I nod away in the sun like any man in his mid-seventies, and I think life has been good to a person like me, and one like Laurel, and I smile at my broken idolatries, and the new life that is freshly surging through me.

In the late afternoon Laurel comes across to me. She scarcely notices the shed.

'Do you have any onions?' she asks me.

I take her inside, telling her to watch the paint. I show her bunches of onions—white, brown, red and odourless.

'Take your pick,' I tell her.

She picks a bunch of brown onions. Then she looks at me. 'Any ripe tomatoes?' she asks me.

I take her to an ancient suspended aluminium preserving pan. In it are large—very large—crimson-red tomatoes. Her eyes shine.

'You grow the best tomatoes in Australia,' she says.

'Potatoes?' I ask.

She nods. 'The potatoes also are huge.'

'Pink or white?' I ask.

'Pink!' she says.

She needs nothing from the garden. What is stored in the shed is enough. I take her outside.

'Look!' I say, pointing to the shed which is now good as new with its bronze-olive weather paint.

'Oh!' she says suddenly as it dawns on her. 'You've painted the shed.' She is inclined to be a bit critical over the use of paint on an old shed. 'Did it really need it?'

I cannot express my affection for the old shed. It is a bit like my affection for her. Come to think of it I am grateful for the usefulness of both. So I just pat it, and her, affectionately.

She looks quizzically at me. 'What have you got in your mind?' she asks.

I say nothing. I just turn her around to face the east which has given sunrises for over twenty years. The sky is blue and cool in the late evening, but a tinge of gold is reflected in it from the west.

'Great place, this,' I say, and my arm is intimately around her. She nods, looks up at me, and settles in even more.

After a time I pick up the other preserving pan with its onions, potatoes and tomatoes. The tomatoes are on top, of course, because large potatoes can

squash crimson-red ripe tomatoes. I have one arm around her, and the other hand is carrying the vegetables. I want to give the shed another affectionate pat but I cannot since both arms are occupied. I desist, and we walk towards the house.

The Great Riot of Bullabakanka

WE HAD not really retired when we bought the large house on the hill. I had some years to go in our accountancy firm, and Constance, my wife, felt the need for us to get out of the city. Anyway, we named the place 'Bullabakanka'. It was what we called 'a fun name' because when the children were little, my main job was to tell them stories each night. Constance did just about everything else in the house as well as the training of our offspring. I was by way of being a freelance writer in addition to the business, so I liked—and still like—creating stories that went on, for the kids, night after night, never seeming to end.

The story they liked best was 'The Ghost of Bullabakanka'. It was an adrenalin-producing yarn, full of strange houses out in the ghost-town called Bullabakanka. The main character was a young boy who led this gang of children, and they explored some of the old houses, and, of course, caves in the surrounding bush, and all that sort of thing. Even on the weekends, if we were not doing much, they would ask for this story, out of season so to speak.

'Dad!' They would say. 'Go on, tell us some more of the ghost of Bullabakanka!' When I would stare at them with uncomprehending eyes they would start up a chorus: 'Oh, go on Dad! Tell us more about

Kerry and the kids, and the ghost of Bullabakanka.' They would not let up until I agreed, and they knew any form of resistance on my part was useless.

The big house on the hill was a sort of heritage kind of place. It was old, large, had plenty of rooms in its two stories, and fairly well laid out grounds of three acres. The children had fled the coop by this time, but then they had their own coops, and their own children, but they thought Bullabakanka was a great name, and they were sure their own kids would want to come and stay at the old house which was our new home. They also thought it would be a privilege for Grandpa to tell the old stories—especially the one about the ghost of Bullabakanka—and that Grandma would greatly enjoy cooking her special biscuits for all. They also had the idea that we would look after the kids whilst they had breaks from them but Grandma Walsh—my wife, Constance—told them firmly they could look after their children just about all the time.

Anyway, that is the story of how we came to purchase and name our place at the top of Brennan's Hill, not far from the famous Mount Lofty Lookout. Just to put the record straight, this chronicle is not about the kids going mad at Bullabakanka on their holidays, or bikies or hoods gate-crashing some party or breaking up the place. As you will see it was a riot of another kind, and you might say not a radical riot at all. I am not so sure about that, but anyway here is the authentic yarn.

It all had to do with gardening. For all our married life we had lived in a bluestone villa aptly named 'The Rosary'. It was in Toorak Gardens, which, as you

might know, was one of Adelaide's special suburbs. We kept having children until there were five of them—two boys and three girls. The place was fairly well landscaped when we bought it and so had lawns and rose gardens in the front, with very few shrubs and a few small plots for annual flowers. At the back there was a lawn and a sandpit in it for the children. There was the usual Hills clothes hoist—Adelaide's claim to fame along with the Holden car—and, beyond the lawn, a vegetable garden.

Constance was too busy to do gardening. I doubted she even liked gardening though she certainly admired my show of annuals and appreciated the vegetables we grew. When the children were all married she began to foster a few pots with sprigs of this and that. She took over an old fern house which I used to store junk, and she had just about established the beginnings of her gardening when we decided to go to Brennan's Hill and live there. I filled a large trailer with her flower and fern pots and we transported them—with other things—to the new home. As I have explained, the house was decades old, but it was new to us.

Constance showed a firmness about gardening which I had never dreamed was in her make-up.

'Colin,' she said, 'I think that seeing you are ageing a bit, it would be best for you to just grow the vegetables, and I will look after the flower gardens.' I pointed out gently that our new home had no flower gardens. There were just lawns, shrubs and tall trees, a small section for vegetables and virtually no flower gardens.

She seemed almost to ignore what I was saying. 'You can get in one of those bulldozer things,' she said with mixed determination and airiness of approach. 'Those dreadful old shrubs could go, and those ugly stringy-barks, and we could have a sweeping garden there to the left of the house. You could make me a fern house like the one we had in Toorak Gardens, and you could get the bulldozer to enlarge your vegie patch.'

I gasped warily. I know that when Constance sets her mind to a thing she generally accomplishes it. That is how it was with our getting married, having five children and deciding what kind of furniture and odds and ends we should acquire. I trod cautiously.

'At your age of life, don't you think that might be a bit much?' I asked her.

She was close to scornful, tending to ignore my wisdom. She pointed to the back lawn—one of the better formulated areas of our three acres. 'We could put the trampoline there, and the children's swing and slippery-slides, and then they could play around the back away from your gardens and mine. We would leave the shrubs way back there and they could play games amongst them. You could build them a tree-house in that golden ash, and they would be out of our hair when they came.'

So much for Grandma and the children, but what about me? Well I was relegated to the vegetable garden after I had set up the fern house and made the place for the flowers and the children.

'What about rose gardens?' I asked.

She stared at me. 'This time, Colin, you leave the flowers to me—roses and all. You just look after

your vegies. You will like that. When you retire it will give you something to do.'

In Brennan's Hill they have scores of handy folk who do lawn-mowing, pruning, stump-removing and also general landscape work. So we used them a bit to get the place in the order Constance was planning to have. Admittedly I had less time at home those days what with belonging to this club and that, and keeping up business contacts and the like. So our new grounds were pretty much shaped as Constance wanted them by professional help.

I remember the night when we saw that the helpers from the Hill had done their work at considerable labour and great cost. We stood in the late afternoon and surveyed what was to be about the best garden in the district. As yet nothing was planted, no annuals, no roses, and not even one bean seed in the rough cultivation of my large vegetable garden.

In a way we seemed to be setting out on our life's work, and this all when we were in our late fifties. Really the riot was about to begin, but I had no premonition of what would happen. As a matter of fact I can scarcely remember a ripple in our relationship or our reasonable way of life.

The grandchildren certainly loved the tree-house. I had to get out my Black and Decker and work at measuring up pieces of timber, and remembering what I had learned at school about carpentry. It was also the kind of school which taught us horticulture and agriculture, and I had always wanted to be a farmer, but our three acres at Bullabakanka was about the closest I would ever get to that.

Anyway we built the tree-house and the grandchildren insisted we didn't have a ladder up to it but spikes driven into the thick trunk of the golden ash, and they became agile in slipping up to their coveted haven. Likewise I worked hard on the fern house, making it from perma-pine, some old water piping which had been lying around, and, of course, shade cloth. I even made a wide shelf, a table almost, on which Constance could work with her pots and plants. She did this and more: she soon learned to hang her fern and flowers baskets on hooks suspended from the pipes.

It was her way of gardening that troubled me. She had bits of this and bits of that, and she put them here and there and everywhere without rhyme or reason. I thought she was putting them there temporarily, but was appalled to find that this was not the case. Here were succulents and alongside them perennial ground-cover plants, some which later grew to four feet in height. Ground cover? Ye gods!

She also decided she would put in roses. I had looked forward to helping her with them. We have always had a history in our family for growing roses. A bit regimented I admit, but then roses have always grown in rows. Not here at Bullabakanka, however, not with Constance. Here a rose and there a rose, and in between Canterbury bells and hollyhocks. There also bulbs, like lowly freesias and proud belladonnas and, of course, blue and white agapanthus, to say nothing of irises. Well, they might have looked good enough if all together but they were mixed with annuals like stocks and snapdragons—large and small varieties—and along with them hippeastrums and November lilies.

It was unbelievable. I watched it all growing, along with the numerous weeds which seemed to feel they were part of this new age. Constance planted annuals and perennials willy-nilly, all mixed up together.

I escaped at last to my new vegetable garden. I had divided it into a few long beds, and had fashioned cement paths between them so that I would have no trouble from the heavy winter rains, slipping and struggling to push a barrow, for example. I was working some old compost into the soil. There was plenty of it around, in piles, and I had been given a great load of Mallee sheep manure, taken from under the shearing sheds and old stockyards. One of my colleagues had a Rundle Street farm and was glad for me to take rotting cow manure from an age-old pile. I really worked on that soil. After all, my reputation was at stake: I had to produce large vegies.

One day she invaded my domain. She looked at all the work that had been put into it, and then said loftily, 'I hope, Colin, you are not going to regiment your vegetable plants.'

'Regiment' was a word I knew. I had been in the Army. In fact I had been in an artillery regiment, first as a gunner and then as a Warrant Officer.

'What do you mean, "regiment"?' I asked.

'You know,' she said in the same lofty voice, 'putting them all in rows, and getting them to stand to attention, and that sort of thing.'

I stared at her with wild unbelief. 'Getting them to stand to attention?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said, 'like the roses we always had in rows. Lined up as though they were on parade,

waiting for the Sergeant Major to call them to attention and then call the roll.'

I said, gently, 'Constance, they were plants, roses, flower bushes. They weren't soldiers.'

'Of course,' she agreed with her feminine logic. 'What else? So why did you recruit them into your army?'

I had been through this kind of conversation many times, and I knew it was hopeless using male logic. An idea darted into my mind.

'They were there, like that, when we bought the place.'

'Of course,' she agreed, and there was a gleam in her eyes. 'But you left them like that all those years. You could have shifted them, made them free, higgledy-piggledy and quite free.'

'What kind of a freedom would that have been?' I asked. 'They would have been overgrown with other plants.'

I knew it was no good arguing. She would never lose, and I would never win.

'Now look here,' I said with great authority. 'You keep to your garden and I'll keep to mine. This is sacred ground. I'll grow vegetables my way.'

She nodded absently, and then began to make suggestions. 'If you had small gardens and boxed them in and built them up high with plenty of soil and some mulch and if you had a variety, then you could really grow *good* vegetables.'

'When,' I asked, 'have I never grown *good* vegetables?' She knew I had always grown good vegetables.

'I mean even better ones,' she said. She saw I was going to shoo her off, and she made herself scarce. Still, she turned at the top of the garden and said, 'Plants are like humans. They like freedom.'

My parting comment was, 'Don't think they are all like you.'

Sometimes I am thoughtful so I keep my eyes and ears open for things to chew the cud over. Like Elaine, Constance's sister who is married to Ted, my friend. They have just built their house a bit south of us, and we went to see them recently. They have a lovely home of rammed earth and it is quite palatial. Out the front of it Elaine has a medley of plants stuck in the soil.

I said to Ted, in front of her, 'When are you going to make her a garden, Edward? You can use my rotary hoe if you wish.'

Her eyes flashed indignantly. 'Make a garden! she exclaimed. 'That is the garden!'

Shades of her sister! I tried not to show my horror. I turned away. Constance grinned. She saw it all and delighted in it.

Then there is Claire who rings Constance and has long yarns with her. She is building gardens out of tyres—here, there, anywhere. And everywhere of course. At least there is some order in tyres. They are mainly for potatoes. You get the plant to put its head above the tyre and then you put another tyre above that one, fill it with earth and the one plant has to make more tubers. Fair enough!

There is also Alison. She is Jim Baker's wife. He puts in shrubs here and there. He knows how high and wide they will grow. Alison comes along and puts agapanthus in between the shrubs. Agapanthus are great fighters, and they have a mandate in life to gather as many snails unto themselves as is possible. On wet nights thousands of snails spread across the world in search of delicate seedlings and cabbages young or old. Alison also puts other plants together

—like roses and climbers. One day Jim will be caught in the overgrowth, and never get out. I notice some-times that he has deep anxiety in his eyes, but having been through one World War he thinks he will escape another.

So I ask around. It is true: women grow things higgledy-piggledy. They like it that way. Confusion and immoderate profusion seem to worry them not a whit.

I like my orderly garden. Look at the plants, row upon row, generally standing to attention. Only the potatoes are slouches, but if you keep hilling them they seem to stand upright enough. Strawberries will get out of hand if you don't keep them in rows, thick pea straw holding them in line. Of course, there is nothing to compare with sweet corn. They are soldiers at any estimate. Firm, upstanding, tassels rigidly aloft, cobs at the ready. They almost salute you. They almost present arms.

And so it goes on. Of course the beauty of it all is that you can dispense with the weeds via the rotary hoe. You can go down the rows and dig carrots, cut off fat lettuces, find elusive beans, and appreciate the firm sticks of celery. Looking at the tomatoes I remember Connie's comment on plants liking to be free. Tomatoes are really vines and will clamber over any and every thing if you let them. 'Stake 'em up!' I say. You can prune them, tie them, shape them, grow them and they never answer back, except to give you great crimson lanterns of fruit. I believe with all my heart that plants like discipline. Of course I never shout at them, but they accept regimentation as though humanity was meant to be lord, and not entangled in treacherous under-growth, over-growth and all-about-you-growth.

I would leave it all there except my children see everything in black and white. The girls think you should let things ramble, go where they will, just as they used to like to do. The boys are non committal but a wink or two tells me they think Dad's way is fine. The grandchildren are as yet untutored, innocent. They run over strawberry patches exulting in the ripe fruit, but I notice they stay away from the cabbages. They find Grandma's gardens fascinating: you can get lost in them, but mainly they like the tree-house.

It is now many years since all of this happened. The grandchildren are grown and have their own children, but they like to come back to Bullabakanka time and again. Again the strawberries are raided. Grandma's fern house always evokes admiration. It is sure a higgledy-piggledy on its own—ferns clustered into one corner, a tree fern, native ferns, maiden-hair fern in crowded proximity, wax plants, climbers and the like; hanging baskets galore until you can hardly move between them.

Sometimes, down on the lawn and away from the garden, at a rare moment, you look up and you see creaming masses of daisies, all in bushes, white with yellow centres, yellow with yellow centres, pink with pink centres, and so on, and for a moment you are almost deceived into thinking this is rare beauty. Daisies making rare beauty! I turn in loyalty to the vegie garden, and think of all the vegetables, not two of a kind the same colour of green, and I know that is really beauty.

One of my daughters is a pure, natural blonde. She often tries to talk me into Connie's way of gardening.

'Why don't you go down one year and scatter different kinds of seeds all over the place and then let them be?'

The heresy is dreadful but I smile and hide my horror. I murmur that it would be a different sort of garden. I am not convinced, and she knows it.

'Daddy,' she says, 'you are too martial. Relax. Enjoy life. Don't make everything conform to your ideas. Stop being the Colonel. Stop being military.'

I am startled. Is she telling me something? Then I see she is defending or propagating her way of life and at the same time standing up for her mother. I don't exactly stiffen, but try to smile gently. She interprets it as critical.

'Patronising!' she shouts, and I see she is her mother's daughter. If my sons did not wink I would be devastated. I think about giving the cabbages a dose of derris dust. They drift off to the golden ash and look up into its branches.

Now it is all long ago, even though it seems like yesterday. Constance seemed patient to the last, especially in her pain and weakness, but she never flinched. She saw my sadness and brought out her age-old belief.

'There's nothing that a minute in heaven will not fix up,' she told me, time and again. I had rather hoped it might be fixed up here, now. It was not to be the case.

The family were with her at the last, though their children were out and about and up in the golden ash. Constance would have liked it like that. They were all there, sober and quiet at the funeral service. Something in them that had come from her

responded. 'Deep calls unto deep,' they say, and they are right.

In our family we don't talk about 'wakes'. Grandma had gone straight to heaven. We all returned to Bullabakanka for a kind of gathering to honour a great woman. When it was over some of them wanted to stay for the night to comfort me. I was grateful, and said I thought I would be all right.

Of course it was lonely, and not to be believed, but I walked around the house looking at old photographs of her and the family. There was one beautiful colour photograph of the roses in Toorak Gardens, and I remember Constance's talk about them being denied their freedom. They seemed pretty cheerful in this photograph—a mass of bright colour—and I went close to smiling.

Next day there was a welter of phone calls, and so I had little time to think about anything. In the afternoon I slept a little, feeling my age a bit, but when I woke I was most refreshed. I thought I would stroll about the garden. The vegies were quite a bit subdued as though they sensed this fitted the occasion. I nodded to them as one does to the troops when they are on parade—with the proud Colonel smile.

I walked across the vast lawn and looked up towards the house. I wondered whether a miracle had taken place. There was her garden, all higgledy-piggledy but something about it mystified me. It was not higgledy-piggledy. It was a mass of colours and supporting green background. The garden was lovely, beauty itself. I started and stared again. Nothing had changed. It was still entrancing. I kept looking at it, unable to believe my eyes. I held my breath for fear it was a momentary illusion.

It was none of that. It was a glory of loveliness. Fearing it might change, but wanting to see it more closely I walked towards it. Around me was silence, that special silence of the late afternoon. The usual bird songs and calls were absent. It was like focussing with a video camera enlarging, bringing it all near. Now I could see the various flowers. I knew some of them were annuals which had crept up through the higher perennials, small shrubs and bushes. It was like some deliberate symphony of flowers, an orchestra of colours. It fitted the music she always loved.

I swallowed a bit, peered, then stepped back as though I wanted to get as wide a lens-view as possible. I kept retreating, but always my gaze was on the massed beauty of the blooms, the indescribable profusion of loveliness.

There was no shame in my memory of our argument about gardens. I looked back for a moment to my own, and it was as though they nodded homage to the beauty that was before me, as though it was a woman to their man-ness. There is a worship which is not idolatry, and that I was giving to her as I whispered, 'Connie, that is unspeakably beautiful!'

It seemed the tassels of the sweet corn nodded in unison. I felt they might blow a deep and resonant 'Last Post' and then a rousing 'Reveille', but of course it was all in my mind, or, rather, in my heart. Of course I bowed, not just to cover the tears, for no one was there to watch, but as I say, it was the homage which is not idolatry. I suddenly, though quietly, understood the freedom of which she had spoken.

'A great riot of beauty at old Bullabakanka,' I said, thinking how gentle a riot it all was, but then a riot for all that.

The Man in the Bush Burberry

YOU MAY have seen the old man at the Adelaide Festival of Arts and in particular at this year's Writers' Week events. There was nothing prepossessing about the grey-haired fellow. He was like one of the grizzled Diggers you see on the annual day of the Anzac March. They are all around the place, and you know them for what they are. 'Typical,' you might say.

For his part he sat in the large tent at the Writers' sessions, and he lapped up what the younger men were saying. He thought them clever and even brilliant. He marvelled at their use of language, and the way they could communicate their ideas. Most of all he just liked being with hundreds of people who were of like mind. They all loved writing. He knew they idolised it just as he had decades ago. Now he idolised nothing. He just thought the writing of short fiction, poetry and novels could be excelled by nothing else.

Nobody asked him what he thought of contemporary writing. He would have admitted it was quite varied. He would have liked to yarn with authors about their writing and about his own, for that matter. No one had yet volunteered to do this. He knew they thought he was out of their world. His age would prove that.

It was not that he had not tried to understand them. Every so often on his sheep and cattle station he would send for the latest literary magazines—the small ones—and he would read them from cover to cover. He just wondered at the brilliance of these young fellows, and especially the women. The women were into everything. He also noticed that they were the heads of most of the University Literature Departments. They must have been very busy about their work, for they never answered his letters. Of course it was a bit of a cheek on his part writing to them. He had never been university trained. He had come to understand that unless the intellectual critics in the University Literature Departments noticed what you did, they never talked about your stories or your poems. Even so they talked much about famous Australian authors—few of which had been to university. He wondered what you had to do to get them to read your writing and to comment on it.

Maybe it was a pity he hadn't followed up his post-war success. In those days the journals took his stories almost as quickly as he wrote them. The pity lay in the fact that he had become busy with sheep and cattle, and growing crops of wheat and barley. It just took up his time and so he had had a break in serious writing. Therefore he didn't have much to send, and, after a time, he dropped out of the world of writers.

Not that he had ever been much in that world. He had occasionally written to other writers, and they had replied to him. That was in those old days when everyone seemed to answer any letter written to him or her. Now the literary people didn't reply. Perhaps they had an image of him as an old 'fuddy-duddy'. A

pity, that. No: these young people were very busy about what they were doing, and serious, too.

Very serious: perhaps that was because there was competition in what they wrote for those brilliant little magazines which the Literature Fund subsidised. The Fund people never seemed to find time to answer his requests. Doubtless they were busy on higher matters.

He felt very encouraged as he burrowed down into his R. M. Williams burberry. He glanced down at his R. M. Williams boots. They all went with his Akubra hat—medium brim.

'No,' he told himself. 'You're what they call passé and you belong to some old school that is now outmoded. Maybe all you can do now is to phone into the "Australia All Over" radio program and tell your old stories. There is still a culture out there that will listen to your stories in their nostalgia for past days. These young 'uns have just built a new and a different world.'

Right now he was listening to the biographer of a famous Australian novelist recently deceased. This man had burrowed into the mind of that aged writer, into the quirks and idiosyncrasies of the famous author. Himself, he had read the man—read all of his stuff in fact—and had thought of him as one of the greatest of all writers, but his mind had stopped short of praising the fellow as the folk were now doing. He had thought the writing powerful, clever, yet evocative only of despair, meaninglessness and emptiness.

He used to wonder why the famous novelist and poet had not given some substance to his audience, something of hope. For himself: he had taken the bad

with the good, both in the Western Desert, in Papua New Guinea and the Islands. He had talked with fellow-soldiers, and in the last days of the fracas, with returning prisoners of war. He had marvelled at the resilience of human beings in the face of suffering and disaster.

He had penetrated down into the depths of the human mind and soul, and had written of this sort of spirit. The writer they were now eulogising had known only despair and dry cynicism. Why were these people so eager to get into the mind of the dead writer? So much of that mind had been pettish and trifling. His powerful writing was not evocative of much joy or hope.

One or two noticed him as he walked around in his sturdy boots and moleskins and burberry, but he figured little with them. They may have noticed his eagerness to handle the books in the great book tent. He figured they were drawing in great hauls of names and felt a slight envy for their popularity. His own books had never had large sales, and now no publisher even bothered answering his letters. Perhaps someone read his writings before they returned them: he could not be sure.

A woman in her late middle age looked at him keenly. She was serving and wrapping books. She asked whether he was 'So and So' and he nodded, a little surprised.

'I know your books well,' she said. 'I have always loved them.'

A little warmth came to her face, like a blush. 'Why have you stopped writing?' she asked.

It was his turn to blush under his bush tan. 'I never stopped,' he said. 'It was the publishers who stopped.'

She nodded and looked towards the brilliant covers of the hundreds of titles that vied for sales.

'Some of those are quite good. You always have good writers. Others are rubbish, but they just know how to stimulate with a bit of sex and the like. They seem to work to some recipe of putting in a given amount of sex and just link up the episodes.'

He nodded. 'It isn't sex as I have known it.'

He thought of Marj back home, and her sane way of life. She gave him time and space to be creative, to gather riches out of the colourful ranges behind them, and the men and women who worked with them, and the folk in the country towns around them. Never ran out of material with that kind of life and people.

In a moment she was too busy to talk to him, what with the docketts and cash till and the wrapping. He watched the exercise of dozens of books being wrapped, and marvelled at the colourful dust covers. He loved the look of them.

He lined up with others for the exotic foods that the stalls were supplying. He took his to a small table and began eating. He watched the folk around him. Again the sense of wonder was with him for so many whose lives pivoted on writing. He loved the thought that he was one with them, but a dry grin came when he thought of some of the so-called famous novels they were selling in the book tent.

He knew it was all part of an industry. The publishing industry was vast, but it was mainly concerned with what attracted folk at the present moment. Things were written that way. He remembered how precarious life was in the early post-war years. That was why he had taken up farming to

support him while he wrote. Marj had liked that idea. She had been idealistic about his writing, and admired his books when they were published. He knew she puzzled over his demise in the literary world but she read and re-read his old books. She kept encouraging him to go on with his writing.

Even if she had not done so, he would have continued writing. Again the wry grin appeared. He had typescripts of novel after novel in his filing cabinet. One day someone might discover them and his name might be made. What then did that matter, when he was dead? He grinned as he remembered Milton's 'Fame is the spur'. Well, he had never really wanted fame. He had just wanted to talk to people and share life with them.

Back in the tent the biographer was continuing his appreciation of the dead writer. All present were adulating. He took off the burberry folding it over his chair and settled down to listen. He loved the quips and humorous cracks of the young biographer. He knew the fellow was laughing all the way to the bank, what with reviews, the newly published biography and his lecturing fees. He checked his cynicism, clearing his mind to really hear what the person was saying.

After a time he drifted off. He rather liked the cosiness of the packed tent, the eager listeners, the clever humour, the sharp criticisms and the frank admiring of the great writer, yet all of this was not enough to hold him. His mind was wandering delightfully. He was not as a miser drooling over accumulated treasure, but as a person who has worked hard to garner good things.

Here were his treasures, evocations of the past and present all stored up for the future. He felt the old fire run along his bones and he wanted to be up and at it again. He wanted to write as he had done in the old days; the times he now called 'good', even the days of almost no literary success. He saw now that they had been good. The packed typescripts were alive in his filing cabinet. Marj had vetted them and she had insisted they were great.

His legs slipped lower, under the chair in front of him. He felt the glow of his own warm spirit, and it was enough for him. Doubtless he was day-dreaming, but it was not linked with success and fame. It was just about writing substantially, giving out of the hoard of his experiences and memories. It was about men and women and life—that sort of thing, the things writers have always pondered and scribbled.

He could hear the roars of laughter about him, and he chuckled at the cleverness of the young fellow, but his mind was back on the station, in his study and before his word processor. He thought he might write a story about Writers' Week and the bright festivities, the readings, the encouragement of the publishers, and the eager purchasers of all books but his own. It was a good idea and he began to revel in it, even as he slowly slipped out of consciousness.

Dear Aubrey

I WONDER, tonight, why it is through these many days that I keep on remembering Chaplain Aubrey Pain erstwhile Parish Priest of Adelaide, Chaplain to the 8th Division Forces who fought in Malaya, and later Rector of Payneham Parish, back in South Australia. Of course I have thought about him for many years, some fifty or so. I can see him as clearly today as when he first came to my bed in a Japanese prison camp hospital. He was not a short man, but then not tall, either. He was obviously a person who had been stout before imprisonment, and even managed still to give that appearance, since his jowls hung a little, and his face was not thin and stretched like mine and others. He seemed to be immune to the sicknesses some of us contracted, and kept a rather cheerful profile. If you had seen him pass, you might have thought he was lugubrious. I know no other word to fit his general appearance. His shoulders sloped a little, as though he were leaning forward. When he did not smile his face looked for all the world like that of a bloodhound or beagle. His eyes were large and soft, but seemed to carry some sadness. When he walked he went softly, as though on the balls of his feet, bent forward, a bit like 'sloping mast and dipping prow'.

It was when he smiled that his whole face lit up. The eyes had a shrewd kindness to them, but they glowed. He had a way of nodding as though he knew

what he was thinking and what you were thinking. When he spoke his speech was precise, his thick lips deliberately pronouncing what he had to say. Each word was chosen, each idea the result of thought. There was always humour no matter how important the subject, how deep the conversation. He never appeared to think he was brilliant, but he would not let brilliance surpass commonsense, so deeply rooted in the earth he was.

In no way was he a hero. He had been frightened out of his life during the action of war on the Malay Peninsula and the days on Singapore Island which had led to that debacle of panic and capitulation, albeit immense bravery and courage were plentifully evident. I understand he took refuge in alcoholic comfort. This is about the worst I can say for a man who was Chaplain to the Australian Imperial Forces. At the same time he attended with affection the wounded and the distressed. His honesty about his fear always brought admiration from me, although I was often tempted to despise him. His humility was genuine: he knew himself to be no hero, but then I was never sure he was not a hero. The men who had worked with him held him in high affection, if not esteem. Perhaps they just loved him and covered any of his intermittent sins. I do not know.

When he first met me I was in a state of anger. It was anger at some of the practices that James Clavell describes in his brilliant novel, *King Rat*. I weary these days of going back over those aspects of human depravity. To concentrate on them is of no help to anyone. That was how things were, but I was not only idealistic: I was an angry young man, angry as all those who would perfect a world in which sin and crime and selfishness have their way. My

problem was that my anger did not help me to be calmly objective, properly detached, and as the Puritans used to say, 'disinterested', that is, unprejudiced. I angrily pursued my way of being critical and urging folk to take the right way. You might call it sheer moralism but it was better than that. It was a genuine desire to see the lot of everyone alleviated. If we had all shared everything, from the highest to the lowest in rank and suffering, then many would have survived who died. I was battling an age-old problem of human selfishness and 'man's inhumanity to man'.

An angry man is always irrational to some degree. What saved me from intense bitterness was the faith experienced and instilled into me as a child and a young man. Whilst I was about to reject much I had been taught it nevertheless clung to me. I thought it was dispensable ballast I could forever do without. I jettisoned it bit by bit although the day was to come when I would seek to bring it back on board. Meanwhile my little barque of life was tossing like a chip on the ocean of life. Excuse this little purple patch of imagery, but it fits the case as it was then.

In my first encounter with Aubrey I found him to be a kindly man, willing to be a friend, and to share his life with me. I was a sergeant: he was an officer, but friendship began. I was a bit aghast when I learned he was an Anglo-Catholic for that offended my evangelical and Protestant frame of mind. In a way that was a bit humorous seeing I was at that time about salvaging the training and beliefs I formerly had. Something within me still gave them a value of sorts. If they were deficient they were not as deficient

as the ideas of this chaplain. I never quite saw the humour of it at the time but the post-war years helped me to do that.

Aubrey was a thoughtful man, and always seemed to want to be taught. He gave this helpless collection of skin and bones, which was I, a dignity that was heart-warming and encouraging. I never remember him criticising. He had a way of giving a polite smile when he did not agree, and sometimes he looked incredibly pompous in his personal beliefs, but he was fair. Maybe he would discover that he was wrong: that was the impression he gave, and it always disarmed me.

We had plenty of laughter. He was great medicine in an over-serious situation. He quietly helped innumerable sick and wounded. He had a light and com-forting touch of hand and his eyes always conveyed sympathy without pity. He had a fund of stories from the past; an endless supply in fact. He had certainly lived much with men, celibate as he was but with-out making it a fetish. He was gentle but never effeminate.

With me he was constantly curious. I guess I was a bit of an enigma to him, so many-faceted was my thinking. Although a member of the Divisional Signal Unit I had been seconded to the Convalescent Section of the hospital because of a gammy leg that was partly paralysed. I could act as librarian to the Convalescent Depot, and that brought us even closer together since we were both lovers of books. Being a writer, yet so young that I had scarcely tried the market, I could not lay claim to be a great writer, but I wrote four hours a day, as also I read four hours and pondered four hours. In that sense my prison days were well used.

My reading covered almost everything, a whole range of literature—fiction, philosophy, theology and other non-fiction materials being accessible to me. You may wonder how this could have been. Most servicemen carry a book or two with them, and in the last days before being incarcerated, fighting personnel snapped up every book they could find in deserted houses and libraries, so they brought a sizeable amount of literature into the camp. There were two libraries in Changi, one for officers and the other for other ranks. At first I was in charge of the other ranks' library, and then in charge also of the officers' library. For the last eighteen months we were living in a camp at a place named Kranji, quite near to where the present War Memorial Cemetery is situated on Singapore Island.

I can remember the long walks we had. This man sought to peer into my mind. My heart he left to myself, but he was eager to know my mind. In many ways he was naive: he thought I did not know what he was about. I knew all right and protected myself, even though I trusted him as I have ever trusted few. I sense—after all these years—that he really wanted the thinking I had gone through, the results I had achieved. So we talked on many things whilst we saw in the distance the blue of the Johore Straits and around us the well kept compound square of the Selarang Barracks with its chapel built by our hands—the place of solace for many wounded minds and pained bodies.

'You are really a pacifist,' he said to me one day. 'You still hold those ideas and ideals?'

I said, 'If men refused to fight there would be no wars.' It was an old idea, but I clung to it. There had

been plenty of pacifist writings around in the '30s and I was an idealist.

'Non-resistance?' he asked. 'What would you have done if Japan had reached Australian shores? Would you have fought there?'

'I fought here,' I said. 'I fought here so that I wouldn't fight there.'

His face lengthened with what I called his lugubrious humour. His lips mouthed the words as a pedant would. 'Would you not say that you are an idealist whose ideals cannot work?'

'If throughout the world all bared their breasts to cruelty and oppression and took their oppressors by their non-resistance, that would alter things.'

He chortled gently, puffing his cheeks, nodding his head thoughtfully. He was always gentle.

'What of your evangelical doctrine of depravity?' he asked.

Of course he stirred my mind, and also my heart. I was sore in those days regarding the depravity of man which we saw all around us. A Brigadier on the Burma Railway who had been trained at Sandhurst in England told his friends that he never believed a human being could become an animal within twenty-four hours, and even fight for himself against all other humans.

I think Aubrey found me a strange person because I had ideas which did not seem to comport with his.

He was a shrewd man. Sometimes he would stare at me seriously, and make cryptic references to something that needed to be talked out. He would say, 'Geoffrey, there is something important I want to talk over with you. It is about you. It needs to be talked out.'

I would become worried and anxious with a nameless guilt. What could it be? What had I done? What was wrong with my thinking? I would say, 'Well, now is the time. Let us talk it out.'

He would ponder, ruminate, shake his head, and say, 'No! We need time to come to it.'

'When?' I would ask.

He would name a time some days away. He would nod again and would amble off, profoundly deep in thought, walking lightly on his feet, sloping off into the distance whilst I began to stew in my own juice, worrying, imagining and wishing the day would come quickly. In the old days they called this 'nervous worrying'. When the day would come and we would chat, I would be immensely relieved that all was well. The matter was not deep. It did not involve my sensitive conscience. In fact, there was nothing wrong. Then I woke up to the fact that the old boy was having me on, playing with me as a cat does with its prey.

'You old coot!' I exploded once—within myself, of course.

Next time I met him I said, 'Aubrey, there is something of importance that I want to talk about. It concerns you.'

'Well, Geoffrey,' he said slowly, 'and what is that?'

I shook my head. 'It isn't really anything I could talk about now, it is so serious. Let's give it a few days, and maybe we will both be ready.'

I saw something like alarm in his eyes. He tried to get us to talk it out then and there, but I shook my head firmly. I stated the day again, turned on my bony heel and tottered off. Once when I looked back he was staring at the ground: there was 'nervous worrying'.

'You old coot!' I thought. 'Serve you right!'

He stewed painfully and when the day came I just roared with laughter as I told him it was nothing. 'Never come the raw prawn with me again, you old scoundrel,' I said. His relief was comical, his smile broad, his expression rueful. His dirty tricks were finished. Our friendship for ever was established. Dear old Aubrey!

Aubrey loved his priestly ministrations. He withdrew from us into another world when he celebrated the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. He was on another plane, though whether in his imagination or in some spiritual sense I never really knew. I know he saw himself primarily as a priest and that was his reason for living, his true vocation. He would gladly—even airily—admit that he was most unworthy as a man to have such a calling, but then he saw the Holy Communion as having power and efficacy to transcend his earthiness. Being an Anglo-Catholic he saw in the sacrament something happening in heaven which was one with what was happening on earth at the same time. My habituated Low Church evangelical mind despaired of what I considered to be so much foolishness, but I never decried him and his practices but deeply admired him in them.

Of course I was then in my state of anger and protest. I now read books which had once been on the prohibitive Evangelical Index—Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, Aldous and Julian Huxley, and the like. I smile these days when people use the terrible term 'fundamentalist' of me. The other theological smear-word is 'obscurantist'. I am serene in the knowledge that I am none of these, but then I thought I was a bit

naughty when I read books which now I think quite innocuous. I revelled in the Anglo-Catholic Bishop Gore and liked most of what he wrote. I didn't even know that George Adam Smith was a 'liberal'. His commentary on Jeremiah is still with me. What a book I found that to be!

The biggest surprise Aubrey gave me was when Good Friday came around. He had planned an open-air meeting on the Selarang Barracks compound. I suspect—in memory—that we used copies of *Alexander's Hymns No. 3*. If it wasn't that then it had all songs from it, songs I never expected that man to sing. Perhaps I thought 'There is a Green Hill' in his orbit, but not 'The Old Rugged Cross' and some of those invitation hymns. We could have been with evangelists like Moody and Sankey the way we conducted that meeting. In fact I wondered whether Aubrey had once been in the Salvation Army. He preached like a blood and hellfire evangelist. He made an appeal. This happened each Good Friday. He preached 'the Cross' without any apologies.

I had to revise all my ideas. I tackled him about the whole matter of what men called 'religion' since my own evangelicalism was dissolving under the cynicism of Bernard Shaw, the scientific approach of the Huxleys and the introspective novels of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and the French novelist, Proust. Also I was reading masses of material on Eastern Religions and found that reasoning was very much my cup of tea. I was reading philosophy, psychology and psychotherapy and a new world was opening up to me. I have never thought of myself as brilliant,

but I knew how to get a handle on the ideas of thinking people.

So I would tackle Aubrey about Christianity and its foolishness. Besides Aubrey there were other chaplains with whom I argued. One was a Welsh Presbyterian by the name of Hugh Jones. What a man he was! Tall, thin, intellectual. He had a liquid voice and a keen mind. I liked him. He responded wonderfully to me, and showed me how shallow was my grasp of these new things. He had passed through them and seen their insufficiency. He was the man who told me I should never preach until I had read all of Dostoyevsky's novels. He told me that Chekhov and Turgenev were not in the same street. I was soon immersed in *Crime and Punishment*. There was another chaplain who went also by the name of Jones. He was an Anglican of my ilk, and he was a gentle but strong person who evaded me like the plague when I appeared. He was no controversialist. Aubrey would also evade me if he saw 'that look' in my eyes.

One day he said, 'Geoffrey, you have a good mind. You reason well, but not all your reading and reasoning will get you anywhere.'

Again the calm, lugubrious stare, the faint smile playing around the lips, the almost bulbous eyes surveying me as a spaniel does one it likes but faintly fears.

'Geoffrey,' he said, 'I don't need to argue about the existence of God or His goodness.' He paused and said with a flash of a laugh and triumph, 'I know!'

He was right. He knew. That got to me more than all of the other writers who were for or against God. I knew he knew. I also knew, but was fighting what I knew.

At the commencement of this narrative I said I had jettisoned a lot of cargo. I had considered it redundant; I had thought it hampered the travelling of my barque. Now I found myself stretching out to it and taking back on board that which I had thought valueless. Something was happening—building up. I did not even sense that a crisis was looming ahead.

When it came it seemed mild enough: just a belief that God had made the laws we knew, and that to reject these as being of human origin was wrong. Mild as the revelation may have seemed to another it was explosive for me. It happened quietly in the midst of one of our meagre meals, but the consequences were stunning and life-transforming. The incident was told in my book, *Angel Wings*, and I know it to have affected some readers quite deeply.

Aubrey picked up the change in me. Our conversations were different. I was not eager to argue and controvert. He was a trifle puzzled and tried to discover what had transformed my thinking. I didn't bother telling him. I was just grateful he had been there all the time, not as brilliant as Hugh Jones, not as detached as the other Chaplain Jones, and certainly not a racketeer like one famous padre who was a black marketeer and a master of histrionics which made men weep. I was just glad for this plain unassuming sinner who in a trice could be a priest and preside over the mystery of the Eucharist and on Good Friday turn into a 'Sallie' of the most evangelistic fervour.

Many were the days and nights in which we talked of God and His things. We instinctively avoided the doctrine of Apostolic Succession. He had no objection to my leading a study group of folk who now

shared the things I had discovered on the day of that meagre meal. He was bowler to my batting, batsman to my bowling. He was my wicket-keeper and backstop, long stop and whatever you might imagine. He never let up on me. He was no longer afraid of my brilliance—so-called—but hounded me like a baying beagle whenever my thinking was wrong, whenever I misunderstood those outside my enclosed circle or when latent bitterness threatened to explode. Of course, I had reverted to my evangelical modes of thinking. I made excuses for Aubrey because I loved him deeply, but others of his ilk still passed under my critical eye.

Hugh Jones was very much of a free thinker. He scarcely knew any distinction between liberals and moderates. He just loved humanity, kept a high ethical profile and was the least legalistic person I have ever met. With all those gifts, skills and merits he possessed he could never quite give me what this Anglo-Catholic priest imparted to me. I suppose you could say he gave me a pastoral launching into the ministry that suddenly flourished around me. My dilemma of men in evil and men in good was reasonably resolved. It would take years for me to understand grace, to understand the conflict every human being has between the image of God in which he is, and which is in him, and the depravity which each person has in his heart. I think Aubrey helped me to lose my cynicism in coming to this understanding. I attributed little or nothing to his theology: I thought it pretty poor. I thought his life very wonderful.

So much to tell about him, but then peace broke out and we were on our way home. We arrived amidst

the appreciative razzamatazz of a relieved and welcoming Australian society and melted back into our families. Our fellowship group had also dissolved into civvy street, and we were either exploding with what had happened in the POW Camp or we were freezing back into a cold and impenetrable silence, never to thaw again.

Not so, Aubrey: he had an intelligence service that kept me in his sights. He wrote often, even though I rarely responded. He followed me up in every thing I did and was—my reluctance to go back to theological training, my meteoric rise to homely fame in the literary world, and finally, my intention to marry.

It was the last which brought him posthaste from South Australia to Sydney. I never realised what a journey it was in those days. I was delighted to see him plumper but no victim of alcohol. What he wanted to do was to meet my future wife, Laurel. He had remained celibate and I wondered whether he thought I ought to have done the same thing. That was not his thought at all. He eyed my young lady up and down. He talked to her. He asked endless questions. He sensed and discerned. He accepted her gladly. All was well. I was permitted to marry her.

I look back on my days of young ignorance. At twenty-seven, decorated, repatriated and reasonably successful, I thought I did all the right things. Of course Aubrey should have married us, but I never gave it a thought. Come wind, come weather, he was going to be at that wedding. And he was. I can still see him enjoying himself with food, drink and festivity, and all the time his full beagle face kept me and my Laurel in his sights.

Very reluctantly he farewelled us that night as we went on our honeymoon. I am not ashamed to say

that there were tears in those great eyes, but they were tears of joy. In those days people rarely hugged one another and I cannot say we did.

Of course he wrote. He knew the days on our farm where I wrote, grew vegetables, raised calves, milked cows and observed the locals as material for my stories. He knew he still needed to send messages through to aid my rehabilitation. Gradually we both ceased writing. We were absorbed back into society.

I never met him again, but when eventually I came to Adelaide I asked where he was. He had had a rich ministry as a priest. Eyes lit up when he was mentioned. He had meanwhile died—full of years. I resolved to find out all I could about him, but somewhere my heart failed. Would he still be the Aubrey I had known in those strange years of prison camp? I did not think I would like to have a sentimental journey into the past only to find it had changed so much in the present. Cowardly perhaps, but that was all I could face, all I could envisage. As Aubrey had glowed in the past, so it must be for me in the present.

Perhaps my unconscious way out of this dilemma was to write a novel called *Tall Grow the Tallow-woods*. I sent the typescript to a famous literary agent who seemed to be repelled by it, especially by the main character. I think I was a bit startled by the critique of that character. 'I wouldn't touch him with a forty-foot pole,' the assessor said. A trifle disappointed I threw the typescript into a cupboard where it lay for a few years whilst some of my friends who had read it urged me to try to publish it. Eventually a friend offered to publish it and it came from the

press as a hardback deluxe edition and sold quite well, eventually being published as a softback. No other of my many books ever received a reception as this did. I was disappointed when no critic noticed it, and just a bit delighted when The Australian Christian Literature Society acclaimed it as the Christian Book of the Year, although I had not written it as a 'religious' novel.

It was in that book that one of the outstanding persons was an Anglican priest named Father Tom Thwaites. (He was not the character my critic disliked so much.) In fact he was really Aubrey *redivivus*. As the book developed the Aubrey I had known came to life, and lived with me again. I guess many characters in fiction are not really fictitious but folk that one has known. They come through from the depths of memory so that they live as themselves again, moving into the situation required of them yet being wholly independent of the writer who really creates no one, but watches fascinated as his characters move and live and have their being, not reincarnated, but being their true selves without assistance. Such was Aubrey in his new role, and I guess he has been enshrined in this literature for ever. I really cannot imagine the novel having its true being without Father Tom. I am not in the habit of reading any one of my books after they have been published, but now, from time to time, I read, just in order to meet this old friend, and hear his voice speak again. The novel is really my tribute to him.

Every so often the memory of him comes to me. For me he was one of the greats. One day—years after coming to Adelaide—I met a protégé of his, the Reverend Ben Jones. He is a fine man. I don't really envy his years of apprenticeship with Aubrey for I

had mine under other conditions and circumstances. We chatted about the man we both loved.

'He often spoke of you,' he said. 'He admired you so much. He would tell me things you said, ideas you had, convictions you expressed. You seemed to be the one man he could never forget.'

I stared back, unbelievably. 'You mean that?' I asked.

'I mean that,' he said. 'I have wanted to meet you for many years. What a good day it is today.'

Of course I regret not seeing Aubrey all those years, and writing so seldom to him. It has not been like this with many men I have known. He was no saint, and perhaps others may have thought him to be weak in war, but they tell me he pastored on, even when blithered. Humility seems to be weakness but it is true strength.

Dear, dear Aubrey! Great old warrior, scared in war, apprehensive under bombing, no *macho* hero, imbibing more than a trifle to keep up the spirit, but really a great man. If not a great man then why did hundreds of us revere and love him? Mine is not the only memory that blesses him, nor mine the only eyes that suddenly shine at the recollection of him—this Father Aubrey, Father Tom, or whatever you will call him. Some of our eyes still have tears when we think of him, but we don't publish that.

The Awesome Encounter

I HAVE just returned from the Westfield Shopping Complex. You can easily get lost in one of those places, but it is a good spot to sit and watch people. Also there is a good variety of foods. I had curried chicken with special fried rice, and enjoyed it while my wife, Constance, sipped simply on a cap-puccino.

What struck me most around the complex were the notices telling us that there was a 'special' on crayfish, only \$12.50 a kilo. The regular price was \$25.00. Constance said she wouldn't pay even the special price for such a gourmet thing, and we rather praised ourselves for being plain people, liking plain food, and none of your gourmet excesses, thank you very much!

My mind was not much on her prideful boasting. I was away back in my thinking, over sixty years away, to tell the truth. I was thinking about Wahroonga in Sydney, and our regular trips through the bush to the old 'San'—the Seventh Day Adventist Sanitarium Hospital where people wouldn't eat meat, let alone crayfish. Reading this you might wonder why I would even think of the old 'San' but it was on one of our hikes to the place that it all happened.

In those days, back in the 'twenties, there was still plenty of bush in Wahroonga. Where we lived, on the

Pacific Highway, you were fairly close to the bush. A couple of hundred yards down Lucinda Avenue, and you were in the bush. You had to cut between houses to get into the thick of it, especially if you wanted to get behind Abbotsleigh College where all the girls were taught and groomed for Sydney's best society. We were scarcely into our teens but it was fascinating to wriggle through the scrub and gaze on these tennis-playing siblings, and give freedom to our rioting imaginations. Not that we would ever have spoken a word had they seen and addressed us. We would have been tongue-tied. We would have blushed furiously and rushed back into the bush.

On the opposite side of Lucinda Avenue you could break into the wider bush which led to the back of Fox Valley Road, and to the orchards which fringed the suburb of Warrawee. I liked to go with one or two of the fellows. We had not yet reached the gang stage, and I liked it even more when I could go on my own. I was a Keats' fan, and liked Wordsworth and nature. I half-expected dryads and such wonderful creatures to slip out from behind trees and dance their romantic dances in the glorious glades. I had never seen a dryad but I had a pretty good idea of what they would have looked like, had they appeared.

When the fellows were not with me, I would sit on a fallen tree and write poetry. Odes to this and that. I liked the thrill of looking at words which issued from my pencil. I also knew a girl about my age who liked poems, and who was sure I would turn out like one of the Lake Poets.

Looking back you say, naturally enough, 'They were great days!' Well, they were, even though there were some sad things. Like my trapping Sydney

waxbills, those perfect little brown and green finches that have crimson on their beaks and foreheads, and under their rumps—one of the firetail species. I would trap them in their nests with a net and bring them home and put them in my aviary and they would bash their heads against the aviary wire trying to get back to their chicks. I look back with quite a bit of shame on that sort of thing. Getting eggs from nests was O.K. because we only took one, and sometimes as we shinned down some giant eucalyptus, the egg broke in the mouth of the collector, much to the delight of the rest of us, especially if it had an embryo chick in it.

Getting back to our days of frequenting the 'San' area: let me tell you that no rain forest ever exceeded the beauty of that place. Large tree ferns grew plentifully. You could come across a clearing in later December when the Christmas bells were a riot of glory, and when the soft flannel flowers contrasted with their glorious red and yellow. Christmas bushes also abounded, and they coloured near to deep red by the 25th of the month. We would take masses of it home and fill the lounge room with its blossom. There were also waratahs, blooms which have never ceased to move me at the simple sight of them. Clematis rioted everywhere, climbing up and over shrubs and bushes and trees and hanging in great bunches everywhere. Of course they were good days!

There were fauna too. You rarely saw the small animals, but they were there. You might catch sight of a fat rabbit on a bush path, or in summer the endemic blue-tongue lizards and an occasional hair-raising goanna. My brothers always seemed to be seeing double-headed ones, but I only saw them with single heads and bright, unwinking, beady eyes. They

terrified me. Birds were in flocks—waxbills, zebra finches, honeysuckers and parrots. Only the willy wagtails and the beautiful diamond sparrows were here and there. When the rains came so did the cur-rawongs. I can still hear their plaintive and soulful songs, their calls evocative of a strange sadness. I would be impelled to write more poems, even if the leaves were dripping with misty rain. I would sit on any moss-covered log and write to my heart's content.

This day we proceeded towards the 'San' area. We had billy-cans of a sensible size. We had frypans for our eggs and bacon rashers. There were potatoes to be baked in the hot ashes, and a couple of bottles of drink. One of us—'Artie'—carried a large preserving pan. It was made of aluminium and was shaped like a large open bucket. It had a handle. Artie said he wanted to take home fruit for his mum to preserve in tall round jars. Besides the makings for billy-tea we also had some drinks, one called sarsaparilla, and another named creaming soda. We never cared how warm the drinks were in those days, refrigerators being a luxury of a future age—along with washing machines and dishwashers. True, we would lay the bottles in the running water of the creek and come back mid-afternoon when we had exhausted the tea, though you had to watch out for the occasional tramp whose sight was sharp, and whose hands were quick, but we met few of them in our travels.

We were making straight for the plum orchards. They were the first ripe fruits of the season. A little later and the Christmas peaches would be ready. After them the apricots and then the hard fruits. We were experts in silently invading Seventh Day

Adventist orchards, and knew how to slip past the poultry runs where the chooks would act as watchdogs, especially the few honking geese that were allowed to run loose.

'Tiger' Johns was a thickset, hardy youth known for his fast bowling and his incredible cheating. We had no umpires other than ourselves, and he would lie without even thinking. He was a good plum-pincher, but no bush-boy. He was terrified even by rabbits, and he was fastidious when it came to cooking a picnic meal. If a sausage fell on the grey bush sand he would throw it away. We would wipe off the sand and perhaps wash it, but we would eat it. He liked his bacon done just so, and would have none of our semi-burnt offerings. As for getting ash on his fingers peeling a roasted potato—he would have none of that!

'Lamey' Jones, a boy with a slight limp from polio, was in everything. He would shin up any smooth blue gum and get a maggie's egg in a trice. He could slip through the grass between fruit trees and be back in a tick, his shirt filled with plums or apples.

Arthur Green—Artie—was marvellous if caught by an orchardist. He was an artist in feigning sorrow and deep repentance. He gave us time to slip off, to silently skedaddle. He even came back to us with better fruit than we had plucked, the owner being sure he was the innocent one of our small wicked gang of boys.

We had lunch in front of our favourite cave. There was a soft, grey-sand beach in front of the articulate creek. It gurgled and chortled its way over smooth, brown rocks, and the sun would catch it through the trees so that the water would be dappled with golden

coinage. It lent itself to being dammed, and this we did, time and again, until we would have an almost terrifying sheet of water, at which moment we would rush in, push the rocks and marvel at the roar of the released water as it rushed downstream.

Thus it was the day it happened. We had had our lunch. The eggs and bacon were delicious. Even Tiger found nothing to complain about, and the hard crust of the potatoes broke away revealing a white tasty centre which we ate greedily. Even the billy-tea was not too smoky. We lay back exaggerating our enjoyment, burping artificially and making jokes self-consciously as do all young males. We gossiped about teachers, and parents, and some of our friends. In fact the whole thing was blissful. All we had to do now was to get the plums.

It was Lamey who called out to us. We heard the tinge of fear in his voice and wondered what we would do.

'Come quickly,' he said, and then, 'Oh cripes, you ain't never seen anything like this in all your life.'

The glade was quiet enough except for the soft ripples of the water downstream. It was that time after midday when birds seem to sink into silence and all small creatures are quiescent. The sun was mainly cut off by the tall eucalypts and the high tree ferns. Only an occasional shrill whistle of a waxbill broke the hushed silence.

Tiger was sitting on a rock, his head resting on his knees and he was staring down at the stream. The creek was hidden from us by native ferns, so we crept up and sat with him on the rock. We looked and could see nothing.

'There, on the bank,' he said, and peered towards it. Again, we saw nothing.

'There,' he said, pointing up the bank.

It was then we saw it. I had never seen anything like it. It looked ancient, like something out of prehistory. In those days we knew nothing about alien creatures from another world. I was held in thrall, thrilled, and began shivering with a strange fascination. We had discovered something no human being had hitherto seen. Tiger was almost frothing from the mouth.

'I'm going,' he said. He made to dart off.

Lamey restrained him. 'Don't be a fool,' he hissed. You will frighten it away.'

I watched closely. Tiger sat as though frozen with fear and despair. Lamey was clasping and unclasping his hands in delight. Artie was making faces at the creature, and he showed no trace of fear.

'It's a lobster,' Artie said. 'A plain grey lobster.'

'Lobsters don't live in the bush,' said Lamey. 'Anyway lobsters are red.'

Artie grinned. 'Not until they are boiled,' he said. 'You boil them alive.'

Tiger almost gagged. 'You don't boil anything alive,' he said scornfully. 'That's primitive.'

'Primitive' was a big word for Tiger but he lived in a clever family. They were also a gourmet family, and Tiger knew a thing or two about eating crustaceans.

After a time something dawned on me. 'It's a crayfish,' I gasped. 'It's a freshwater crayfish.'

Lamey nodded. Then he said, 'Oh boy! What a feed!'

Tiger nearly gagged again. 'You wouldn't dare eat that!' he shouted.

Lamey shushed him. 'We are going to have to catch that thing,' he ventured.

Artie guffawed. 'And what with?' he asked.

'With that chaff bag we use for our gear,' I said.

They all turned to me. In fact they turned on me. They jeered. 'Who's going to do that?' they asked.

My legs were like jelly as I walked to the creek. The adrenalin was flowing. My heart was pumping away but my body was just about paralysed.

I reached the creek and stared across at the huge creature. It was thick in the thorax, it was long in the body. It was probably a couple of feet in length, but then I would have said 'three'. Its legs moved slowly, reminding me of a tarantula or even a slow trapdoor spider. I looked at its pincers and thought them powerful. Its eyes were on stalks and they seemed to fix on me. Its antennae waved with what I thought to be grim menace. For a terrible moment I imagined it was an eater of human flesh. I feared to move lest it would scuttle away.

I moved around to our chaff bag. A frypan was resting on it and I shook it off, silently. It tumbled away. I opened the sack, trusting the creature might walk into it.

When I waded through a shallow part of the creek, the thing stopped. Its antennae were waving. This was before the days of radar, but now I think he must have had radar. It made a quick move as though to dive into the creek and hide in its waters, but I was too quick for it. Almost in despair I flung myself upon it, the sack spreading over it, and I over the sack. The thing sank beneath the sack.

I put my arms around it, and lifted it. Its claws were close to my nose and I leaned back, stretching away.

The boys had first stood as though paralysed. Then, with the exception of Tiger, they rushed over to

me. They, too, took hold of the sack and helped to envelope the creature.

'Got him,' said Lamey.

'Caught it,' said Artie.

'Look out for those pincers,' Tiger cried. He was shuddering but now could not keep way.

'We cook it,' I announced.

'What in?' Lamey asked.

'Disgusting,' said Tiger.

'Scrumptious, that's what,' said Artie.

What in, was the problem. Our billies were large, but too small to hold the crayfish. Then we thought of the preserving pan.

'Can't use that,' said Artie. 'We need that for the plums. Told Mum I'd bring her plums for preserving.'

There was silence. Tiger looked pale. Lamey looked delighted. I still had a sense of enormous dread within me because I had captured a free creature of another age. I even thought of taking it to the museum and of trying to identify it.

Artie decided it for us. 'We can get plums in the billies, and we can boil this in the preserving pan.'

'Still too large,' said Lamey.

I nodded. 'We cut him in halves.'

Tiger was horrified. 'That's disgusting,' he said.

It was time to arbitrate. 'We kill it first,' I said, 'then we cut it in two. We eat one half and we take the rest home to the families.'

Artie put in his calm look. 'How do we kill it?' he asked quietly.

'Hit it on the head with a rock,' I told him.

There was silence. I picked up a large stone. 'Hold it while I hit him.'

They all looked awed but there was horror in Tiger's look. 'I'm going,' he said. Tiger was always going when anything difficult came up.

'You're staying,' said the chorus of voices.

Tiger stayed. I aimed at the head. I knew I would never have done it on my own. I knew I would have cleared off at the first sight of the great creature.

The thing convulsed as I hit it. Then there came a rush of something to my head and I kept hitting him. Its head was mashed, but its legs kept moving. We let the silence drift over all things. I was breathing heavily.

'That's it,' said Artie. 'Now we pop him in the pot.'

'Better make the water hot first,' said Tiger who was trying to rehabilitate himself with the group.

'Goddie killed it,' said Lamey, 'so I'll cut it up.'

He worked away with his scout knife. Sharp as it was it was difficult to sever the long tail from the hard-shelled thorax. I watched fascinated.

We stoked the fire. We had put a few more stones around it to hold the preserving pan. Then we got the fire roaring.

After a time the water was bubbling and we dropped the head-half into the pan. We found that the pan was big enough to take the severed rear portion so we dropped it in also.

'I reckon we ought to go off and get those plums,' Lamey said. 'Tiger and Artie and I will go. Goddie can stay here and look after it.'

They seemed to be relieved to go. Tiger made no objection. He would be happier pinching plums. Artie gave me a last wink and a thumbs up sign. I swallowed a bit and sat to watch the cooking.

The thing smelled a bit strange. A kind of scum gathered on the bubbling water. I kept looking to see

whether the crayfish was turning bright red as you see lobsters when they are boiled. I did not know then, that I would one day be on Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco—some decades later—watching the fishermen boil their lobsters and crabs and shellfish, and feeding the thousands who crowded around their gourmet pots.

My feelings were of shock. How did this great creature get to this quiet bush place? How could I have captured it and then bashed its head in? I never knew I could do things like that. Problems loomed up large before me about my future. Why, I had never even belted Tiger the time he gave me out l.b.w. when I was on 99, and he was bowling. I had felt angry enough to do it.

What worried me most was the crime of ending the life of this magnificent creature. I had been startled by it. I had felt awe at its descent from the bank. I had stared into its unwavering eyes on their stalks, and I had seen the great claws helping it to labour along the bank. Awe was what I had felt, and now there was the thing in the pot.

The boys came bursting through the brilliant red tips of the short eucalypts. Their faces were flushed.

'We just got away,' they said. 'We think the fruit-bloke is after us.'

There was quick movement. Artie filled the two billies with his plums. We tipped the water from the preserving pan on to the fire. We gathered up our frypan and things, shoving them into the chaff bag. Artie had a billy in each hand. Lamey carried the chaff bag, and Tiger, as usual, looked after himself. He needed all his powers to concentrate on his own escape.

We ran, the crayfish halves flopping up and down in the pan. Every so often we would pause, listen, hear a thrashing of the bushes far behind us, and with renewed energy we would run.

We arrived at Lucinda Avenue and began trudging up the high hill. We knew our pursuer would not emerge from the bush, if indeed he had followed us that far. We were now in our own territory.

Suddenly Tiger exclaimed. 'We left our bottles in the creek!'

'So that's where they stay,' Lamey said. 'Unless, of course, you like to go back Tiger.'

Tiger didn't like. We trudged on. At the top of the hill we sat to gather breath and to plan. We ate a few plums, and they were sweet.

'What about the crayfish?' I asked.

Tiger said immediately he didn't want any, although he would swap his portion for some plums. Artie said he'd just like to take one billy of plums for his Mum. Lamey said he wasn't hungry after the long run.

I was firm. 'We all have a go at it,' I insisted. 'We don't know what it is like, so how we will know whether to take some home?'

There was not much enthusiasm, but we sat on a log just inside the bush, trying to peel the crustacean. Artie helped with the scout knife. The flesh looked white and unappetising. We chewed away at it.

Tiger looked almost green as he gnawed at his piece. He knew he could not beat the peer demand. Artie seemed to like it. He eyes gleamed.

'I'll have another piece, Goddie,' he said.

Lamey barely seemed interested. He chewed and spat, chewed and spat, but his heart wasn't in it. Tiger caught the idea from him but he didn't chew much. I

chewed and caught the bush taste—something like creek-water. I had always liked prawns—Hawkesbury River ones—but this was different. Because I was the leader of the group I had to swallow mine. Artie was also swallowing his.

My mind was seeing the great creature back by the creek, and its ungainly passage along the bank, and then its descent. Even now its eyes seemed to be staring at me. Suddenly I realised we had done a terrible thing. I had killed a creature which had taken many, many years to grow and mature. Maybe it was the largest freshwater crayfish which had ever existed. A yabby is another thing, but it just doesn't have dignity like this one did.

I felt like a murderer. I had killed it, bashing in its head. I couldn't eat another bit of it. I was gagging over the piece in my mouth. There were tears in my eyes, and I felt a bit ashamed in front of the fellows. I stood up, picked up the remaining pieces and threw them into the bush.

I was almost speechless but I stuttered something out. 'We won't take any home,' I said.

They all knew me very well, and especially when I would get emotional.

They stood up and collected their things. We made our way through the bush on to Lucinda Avenue.

My voice was still a bit choked up but I said, 'Don't you ever tell anyone,' I warned them. I almost shouted.

'Cross my heart,' Artie said.

'Spit me death,' Lamey said.

'What's it worth?' Tiger asked, but even he blushed and turned away at the look of rage in my eyes.

We tramped on.

I had finished my curry and rice—Chinese fashion—at the Westfield Shopping Complex, and Constance had finished her coffee. To cover the memory I told her about my visit to Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. I used my best story-telling art, and coloured the event a bit, though, to tell the truth, it *was* a colourful occasion. She was fascinated as I painted the scene with quick, chosen words. I saw the envy in her eyes. She is a born tourist and I am not.

'Did you eat much lobster?' she asked.

I shook my head. 'What about the crayfish?' she asked. She likes seafood although she is no gourmet.

I shook my head again. 'We went off and had steak and eggs and onions at another place,' I told her.

She nodded, but a bit wistfully. I think she would have liked Fisherman's Wharf.

I think its crazy charging \$12.50 a kilo and calling it a 'special', even if has been \$25.00,' she said. Her keen eyes looked at me. 'Good mince is only \$2.'

'Mince and rice,' I replied. 'I like it. I like the way you do it, with spices and all that. What about another cappuccino? You've only had one for a whole meal.'

She smiled and I went and got her another cappuccino. While she sipped away thoughtfully, I was back away some six decades ago. I remembered we kept our agreement of silence, but next afternoon I was back where we had been. Strangely enough the two bottles of drink were still in the creek, but they were scarcely in my mind.

I sat waiting for another grey crayfish to appear on the bank, but none came. I was disappointed and retrieved the bottles of soft drink, putting them into a sugar bag to take back.

I knew I could do nothing to bring back our giant crayfish, but I wandered around miserably, hoping to see one. I clambered along the creek bed, jumping from stone to stone.

Then I saw it. It was larger than the one we had seen yesterday. If anything it was more noble. It stood high on its thin legs and tail, and its claws were waving in the air. So were its antennae. That strange feeling I would always have in the bush and in the jungles, plains and veldts of other countries suddenly gripped me. Yesterday I had not seen beauty but today it was nothing else. I swallowed with joy.

Then, out of the undergrowth appeared another companion creature. It was smaller, somewhat delicate in build and I guessed—rightly or wrongly—that it was a female. They showed no affection, but both began their descent of the bank, making towards the creek, antennae waving.

There were tears in my eyes as I saw them enter the clear water. Once in it, their bodies suddenly galvanised as they shot forward in jerks, and were soon lost in the rocks and the debris. I sat for a long time before picking up the bottles, and my thoughts were deep ones for a youngster, even a poetic youngster but strangely enough they have stayed with me for these sixty years.

Constance finished her cappuccino and looked pleased. She smiled at me.

'Let's go and buy some special steak,' she said. 'You know, something like scotch fillets.'

'No crayfish?' I asked.

'Definitely no crayfish,' she said firmly.

I was pleased about that. Definitely no crayfish.

Grandpa's Photograph

I HAD a bit of a shock this morning, and also a mildly pleasant surprise. I saw Grandpa. I mean my old grandpa who has been dead these many years. He was buried in Rookwood Cemetery, in the Catholic Section, although he was really a renegade from the church, he having married Grandma who was a Protestant colleen, Irish as himself, and I guess as pretty as they come. So how come that this morning I have seen Grandpa?

It was Grandpa without doubt. Full, florid face, white hair—back a bit from the high and sloping forehead—with something of a wave in it, and those bright, blue eyes that stared at you and pierced into you, but were wonderful when his face crinkled with humour. A sort of delicious pang would shoot through you and you would want the Old Man to pick you up and hug you, which, of course he never did.

I saw the bulbous, white eyebrows which lifted to give his full stare. He always wanted you to stare back, never letting your own gaze flicker or drop. He certainly said a lot to you in those looks, and there he was this 75th birthday of my life, looking at me as in days of old. No wonder a bit of a shock went through me, and no wonder delight came, and with it tears of pleasure.

It just burst out of me. I laughed with delight and said, 'Hullo Grandpa!'

Of course he was looking back at me with an identical laugh, as though we both enjoyed the same joke simultaneously.

You may have guessed by this time that it was not Grandpa I saw but myself. I had been running my Philips electric shaver over my white bristles and peering into the mirror when this apparition of the old man appeared. I chuckled a bit and laid my razor down and kept staring, and all the time I was loving what I saw. The reason for the delight was that I had always adored Grandfather. He was a kind of model to me, and I guess I aspired to be like him, and now I was!

There were differences of course. The old man I saw in the mirror lacked a full, white moustache, flowing over and covering the upper lip and stained with cigar smoke so that it was brownish red from the nicotine, but then only about the lips. The smell of mingled cigar and whisky was there all right, but emanating out of my imagination. I have never smoked a cigar in my life, nor have I ever touched a drop of whisky.

Other differences: I have never been a famous bookie, first in the State of New South Wales, nor have I been President of Tattersall's Club. I have never hobnobbed with famous politicians, nor moved in the halls of power. For that matter I have never been on a racecourse except when attending Booksellers' Conventions, but I have loved horseflesh no less and a sight on TV of horses racing and pacing has never ceased to raise a thrill.

Another thing about Grandpa which I secretly dreaded: Grandpa's generous girth. He was a man of average height, thick-set but always strong-muscled.

In his early, wild Irish days he had been a bit of a pug and his whole body had been like steel. Gourmet eating and much drinking had let him fatten about the midriff, and I can remember standing in front of a mirror looking at my own childish tummy with a sinking feeling. I thought there was a suggestion of natural flab there, and although I wanted to be like my idol I hated bellies on older men. I wanted to be without a bulge, straight and upright, and years in the Army helped me to be that way.

To get back to Grandpa: I am sure he was an unusual man, though not without foibles. It was the steel of the man that made me fear and admire him. My own father was almost Grandpa's opposite. He was dark, taciturn, given to anger and what we used to call 'nerve storms'. Even so, he was a strong man, and refused to be dominated by his father-in-law. I think also that he was fairly brave. He had enough strength of character to marry the daughter of a Catholic Irishman. I don't blame him for his boldness, for his wife was as beautiful a colleen as was ever found outside the Emerald Isle. She had taken on some of her mother's lilting brogue and her wedding photographs move you deeply, so lovely she was. She caught my unsentimental father by her rich voice. She was a concert pianist, and acted in some of J. C. Williamson's plays. She had never done an hour's work in the home. Grandpa always had servants and my mother spent hours at the piano, at parties, and being Grandfather's favourite because she was the dead spit of her own mother when she was as young.

I must pull my horns in about my father and mother and get on with the story. To me it seemed

the only fly in Grandpa's precious nard was Grandma. She was as strong as he in character, and would have no nonsense from him, and she disliked his bookie doings. She wanted him to stop the whisky drinking and his occasional bouts of inebriated joy. She abhorred the smell of cigars which hung about her lovely drawing room and which clung to her rich brocaded drapes. She soaked my mother with the Protestant idea of purity and the work ethic, not that her daughter knew how to sew on a button or bake a roast.

I imagined that Grandpa's problem was Grandma's wrinkled face. I dreaded her coming near me. Her wrinkles fascinated me so that I could not take my eyes off them, but they frightened me. When she cooed over me, hugging me till my ribs were close to cracking, I felt in a state of near-shock. I guess I must have shown it because she often looked at me wistfully.

'He's a special one,' she would tell my mother, and my mother would nod. I learned to keep out of Grandma's way and her hugs. When she died I was sorry, and felt a bit guilty about my lack of affection.

Her death did something to Grandpa. Alive, vibrant and ebullient as always, he sprang into greater life. He had run away from Ireland as a boy. Now he wanted to return home to see Black Rock Castle and all the beauty of his birthplace. He also, I think, wanted to show his relatives how prosperous he had become. Nobody ever said so, but I think he had always kept his boyhood sweetheart in mind. Maybe he had dreamed lots about her.

My dark, taciturn father and my white-haired, florid grandfather came the closest ever to genuine affection when my dad offered to look after the

family mansion whilst Grandpa was away on his travels. I think Grandpa was quite generous also. So we went to see the great P & O liner make its way out of Circular Quay, ploughing across Sydney Harbour and being lost from sight as it passed through the Heads. His youngest daughter went with him—my idea of lovable beauty. Long before they went I had decided to marry her.

It was while they were away that I studied a special photograph of my grandfather. He was a man of varied interests and had spacious aviaries in which finches and budgies sang, chattered, fluttered, flew and nested. The aviaries were filled with shrubs and avian mysteries. Water sprayed up on hot days and kept the panting birds alive and fresh. Also there were the great giant macaws in their large cages made of tough steel netting. Pettie, the little Pomeranian bitch, delighted us with her sharp yapping and her high leaping.

Altogether we were in some kind of Eden, except of course, for Father's occasional nerve storms and the pain which comes with nine children growing up together. My adoration of Grandpa Jerome grew with the days of that year before he returned with his boyhood sweetheart, Lillian, who was to grace his spacious home, and whom he was to marry in great style, the reception, of course, being at Tattersalls.

My mother grieved about her father's quick turnaround after Grandma's death. The songs she played were often wistful and melancholy and I see now that she poured out her sorrow on the keys of her beloved piano. When the required days of mourning were ended she held court at afternoon

tea parties, and she would use her wonderful talent of elocution. The poems were always gentle, romantic and sentimental, which was the leftover of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. She would often declaim with flashing blue eyes and expressive white hands the tragedy of the deaths of orphans and misunderstood waifs, and bring tears because of the betrayal of innocent lovers—and all that! But she was strong and social when it came to pouring tea and to sharing womanly gossip, and her rich Irish laughter would warm our hearts. When she was seeing her guests off, we children would slip in and finish off the luscious cakes and rich pastries, and sip the half-cold tea that remained. Tea was forbidden to us all until we reached the age of seventeen.

I had this special photograph of Grandpa which I had filched and hidden. It was Grandpa standing in his garden gear of stout boots, rough tweed pants, an open-necked shirt with long sleeves, and a rake in his hand. Beside him was a substantial barrow filled with leaves, and at his back was a large aviary, birds suspended in flight but all things in black and white. That arrested moment of my grandpa's life indelibly imprinted a way of life and a character to copy. As I grew into being an adult I lost the photograph and mourned its going, but the print was still in my heart and the idol well established in its shrine.

We left the home when Lillian came. My father proudly showed Grandpa the upholstery he had done on the Old Man's drawing room furniture but he was greatly displeased and said so, and had it all unpicked until the former tapestry showed through. I think my father never forgave him. He had tried to show his affection to his father-in-law and the old

fellow had missed the point. This was one of the things I had against him. There was another thing also: Grandpa had never hugged me. I always wanted him to do that and I suspect he did too, but he hated even the hint of sentimentality. Looking back I guess his growling and his grumpling was because he could not handle the softness that often goes with love.

Instead of hugs he would give sovereigns, newly minted, straight-from-his-bookie's-bag sovereigns. There being nine of us children he did this seldom and always secretively, but he would give one of his rare grins, and sometimes would say, 'Don't get drunk on it,' which horrified me because my mother had taught us that being a drunk was one of the deadly sins. She should have known because two of her brothers had come back from the First World War as alcoholics. Alcohol was forbidden in our home. Drinking was one of the few elements of Grandpa that I did not imitate.

With growing up and the passing of time the image of my grandpa faded. He was so besotted with Lillian that he gave little attention to his own children. Of course they were all married except the one I had decided to marry, and so we met rarely. Lillian was tolerated but she was easily going to outlive Grandpa and there was the matter of his wealth and Lillian's claim to it. I never saw Grandpa in his last days, and so I did not witness his aging, his belated return to Mother Church, and his decline into death. Our father and mother attended the funeral, and listened to the will, but all we knew was that Mother and Father talked long and earnestly in the bedroom. There were a few storms, and I suspect that they were

because Mother was now financially independent of Father. I found out later that she was always ashamed of her stocks and shares, especially as some of them were linked with breweries.

A war came and went. A marriage happened and suddenly two of us were mother and father to a breed of fledglings that showed all the life of their great-grandparents but whose links with grandparents were short lived. They managed fairly well most of their days until marriage came to them. Suddenly I was a grandpa. I had none of the inhibitions my grandpa had about affection. I would 'Ooh!' and 'Ahh!' over the amazing matter of my grandchild, but I thought the term 'Grandpa' was ridiculous for me. I was so young! So I kept thinking of myself as 'Uncle'.

'Come to Uncle.' I would say to the first fledgling, and I would throw him up into the air and catch him to squeals of mingled fear and delight. After the second grandchild I began to realise I could not remain as a surrogate uncle and so I came out into the open. I had no image to follow, no pattern to help me until I remembered Grandpa. My paternal grandpa had died long before I was born, and his wife also. So I was left with one grandpa and being the analysing person that I was I began to try to sense the white-haired, white-moustached old man with the piercing, blue eyes and the occasional sovereign. Suddenly he was real to me in a way I had not known.

I remembered the times he had shared his shrewd wisdom. It was mainly by gestures, by small actions, by scorning my childish approaches and pranks, yet by growling out discerning sayings which made me

see the difference between fun and idiot nonsense. I knew he had a soft spot for me. I came to realise that I had imbibed a lot of the Old Man and so I began to use what was there as I related to my grandchildren.

Over the years I had built aviaries in the different homes where we had lived with our children. I had always been attracted to a rake, to a barrow, to growing vegetables and keeping chooks. I had even had a flush of keeping parrots, not in large steel cages but in aviaries that had room for long and high flights. I consciously kept away from a potbelly by doing plenty of exercise and having been a physical training instructor in the Army I kept reasonably fit and modestly thin.

The memorable day came when my eldest sister discovered my old photograph of Grandpa. She handed it to me quite casually, thinking I would inspect it with little interest and then return it. I was electrified, as though a bolt of lightning had hit me. There was the Old Man, large as life and corresponding wholly with the image within my memory data-bank.

'Grandpa!' I exclaimed with a joyful shout. 'What do you know about that?'

My sister, Aileen, had liked Grandpa but had never doted on him. 'Whisky swilling old codger,' she commented. Mother loved him of course, but underneath it all she was also somewhat ashamed of him.

I scarcely heard what Aileen was saying. Also I wanted the photograph.

'I'll keep this if you don't mind,' I said. 'I don't know how I lost it.'

She smiled at that. 'Go on!' she said with a bit of scorn. 'We all had one of these photos. Mother made sure we all got one!'

I was not hearing her consciously. I was looking at the marvel of the Old Man, some rich warmth creeping around my heart.

'Do you mind if I keep it?' I asked, and I wanted it badly.

She raised her eyebrows. 'Never imagined you would want it,' she said.

I mumbled something, disguising my feelings. She looked at me curiously.

After a time she said, 'Keep it if you like. Perhaps one day you might get a copy made for me.'

I promised that but could hardly wait to get away on my own and gloat over the photo. Gloat I did, day after day, and even year after year. I felt secure as a grandpa. Being a grandpa isn't all that easy but is essential to all families. So I kept giving what I could from the one grandpa I had known. Sometimes I would try to imagine how life would have been without him, but I had to give up the exercise. It was fruitless.

Then, as I told you, I saw Grandpa in my mirror this morning, large as life. I regret faintly to have to report that Grandpa's clone has become a bit thick around the midriff, though not quite as much as he was. Lack of whisky and high living, I suppose. Maybe I do more exercise than even the Old Man did.

I went and took the photograph of my mother's father from the shelf above my desk. I went back to the bathroom, and compared what I could see in the mirror with what was in the photograph. I must

admit a certain delight began to grow in me. I went out into the sun and listened to the natural birds of the Hills. Long ago I had decided birds in the wilds were better than those in cages. Breeding birds is costly and eats away at valuable time. Now as I listened to the chortling of the maggies and watched the wattle birds hanging on the crimson bottlebrush flowers and saw the pardalotes twitching and twittering in a banksia bush near the fish pond I had a fine idea.

I went across to where my neighbour, Casey Longwood, was working in his vegetable garden.

'Casey,' I said, 'good-day to you.'

'Good-day,' he replied briefly, straightening up and brushing pea straw mulch from his hands.

'Casey,' I said, 'what is that special camera you have?'

'They call it a Polaroid,' he said. 'Why would you be wanting to know about it?'

'It's like this,' I said, and I told him about Grandpa, and my present work of being one myself, and some of the difficulties of it.

He nodded in a knowing way. 'It's a bit like that with me,' he admitted, 'but what has a Polaroid got to do with this sort of thing?'

I told him what it had to do, and he nodded again. 'I'll get the camera right now,' he said.

'Give me a minute or two,' I said. 'I'll need to change.'

He wondered why I should need to change my clothes but I gave him a quick salute and trotted off to the house. My wife looked wonderingly as I pulled out stout boots, my only pair of rough tweed pants and a plain shirt. Over the years she has learned not to ask a certain kind of question, so she

just shrugged her shoulders and went on doing her embroidery.

I went to the tool shed, and picked out the stoutest rake. I wheeled a barrow to the compost heap and filled it with leaves I had previously raked up. I trundled the barrow over to Casey's fence, and he climbed through and we selected a site for the act. I regretted having no aviary, but a couple of rosellas settled into the creamy eucalyptus blossom above my head and so the situation *felt* good.

I posed, standing upright, legs slightly apart, my right hand holding the rake, with the barrow just beyond the rake. I looked into the camera with what I hoped were piercing, blue eyes, knowing that the sun of the past few days had made my face florid enough.

Casey had the idea. He kept taking shots. I told him I wanted five for my grandsons.

'What about the grand daughters?' he asked.

I said we would fix that later. We would copy them. He shrugged his shoulders, gripped the camera, held it steady, screwed up his eyes, and one by one the photos slipped out almost like paper sheets from a fast copier.

When I looked at the first one my heart almost missed a beat. I pulled the old photo of Grandpa from my wallet. A little shiver went through me. I wanted to breathe, 'Good old Grandpa,' but Casey was looking at me and I could not.

He did give me a curious look as I wrung his hand and thanked him. Perhaps he saw tears in my eyes.

I was walking up to the house to get ready to go into the City to the Remand Centre where my eldest grandson, Jodie, is awaiting his trial. He is a passionate boy, for sure. You should read his poetry

and some of his fiction to know that. He has a lot of his great-grandma and great-grandpa in him and enough of the wild Irish blood to get him into trouble with the law in his adventures.

He and I are pretty close. We share our writing and talk endlessly about it. Sometimes I feel his poetry is too intense, but then who am I to talk? On the way back from the Remand Centre I will call on Jamie and give him one of the photographs the same as I will have done for Jodie. Jamie is a gentle boy hoping to train for church ministry. He is less intense but his writing is no less powerful. The others I will have to post away to the boys in the country. I am tempted, also, to get copies of my grandpa's photograph, but for the moment I will leave it at that. Of course, a photograph can't tell you every-thing, and at the best it just reminds you. I'll send one each to all the grandchildren, but I wonder what they will think.

Going to the Remand Centre I keep thinking of my looking into the mirror this morning, getting that pleasant shock, and then my saying, 'Hullo Grandpa!' as though he were really there, as large as life. All grandpas should be as large as life.

The Little Mata Hari

S HERE Mahomet Ali Khan came early to the study of the missionary. He tapped on a window pane, peered into the room and quickly withdrew. The missionary, he could see, was deep in his devotions.

Shere Khan was himself a man of devotion. He was a Muslim. A true Muslim is a man of devotion. He faces Mecca at the appointed hours of prayer and prays to Allah. The maulvi in the minaret of the mosque calls him to his devotions.

Shere Mahomet Ali Khan stood under the great bougainvillea arch near the study window with lips pursed and hands together, finger tips to tips. He greatly admired the missionary, but at the same time was troubled by the man. Arthur Jensen was far too brilliant for Shere Khan when it came to the matter of debate. The Muslim had always fancied himself as a great debater. He had hoped, very young in life, to turn multitudes of infidels to Islam, but so far nothing of this had happened.

In pursuit of this dream of bringing multitudes into the eternal happiness of Paradise, Shere Khan had developed himself into a scholar. At least, so far as he could assess, he was now a scholar. The maulvi at his local mosque greatly admired him as a man of erudition, although he—Shere Mahomet Ali Khan—sometimes felt uneasy about the adulation he received from his Islamic pastor. Shere Khan knew that many maulvis were not greatly educated,

and that among them were also *chaplusi wallahs*, i.e. flatterers; he could not be sure he had really reached scholar status.

He peered again into the study and saw that the missionary was reading his holy book. Once more the faithful son of Mahomet withdrew, an appropriate piety expressed on his face and in his demeanor. He used the time in dreaming of the conversion of the missionary, or, at least, of an end to his subversion of Islam. People had been converted under the man, and a few had been baptised. For a Muslim who was fundamental in the faith that was a bitter pill.

Now the missionary was in hot water.

Shere Khan had sympathy for him on the one hand, and on the other hand he felt a joy for being in the ascendancy. Of course this joy was for the faith—only for the faith, the faith of the prophet, Mahomet.

A window was opened, and the missionary was leaning out. 'Salaam, Shere Mahomet Ali Khan!' said the missionary. '*Ap ka kia hal, ha?*'

To this inquiry into his health in his native tongue Shere Khan replied suitably. He asked after the missionary's health in kindly fashion, to be told it, also, was excellent.

'Sahib Jensen,' requested the Muslim scholar, 'may I come in?'

Courteously he was invited into the study. As always the eyes of the visitor roved quickly, admiringly and covetously over the vast library of the preacher. He loved the bindings of the books, their vast array on the many shelves. He loved the atmosphere of learning. He only regretted that it was not the scholarship of Islam. In his secret mind—never consciously admitted to himself—he felt there must

be something in it all. Men could not write so much and it all be wholly untruth. He did not let these traitorous thoughts reach the surface, for they might place Islam in danger.

Instead he said, 'It is a beautiful day, Sahib Jensen.'

Within, Jensen groaned. He had preparation to do before his students arrived at class. Last night he had estimated the time he would need. Having made that estimation he had slept the sleep of the just, for his days were long ones, and brought exhaustion in their wake. He knew Shere Mahomet Ali Khan to be a long-winded man. Moreover, when he began this way, he always had a matter of importance behind it, but he needed time to build to a suitable and decent climax. He was obviously about to take that time.

Normally, missionary Jensen observed the proprieties, but he needed time for himself this morning, so he said, 'Shere Khan Sahib, please come to the point. I am a very pressed man. I have students arriving soon, and I wish to present polished lectures.'

The Muslim understood that. Not for anything would he have had his friend shamefaced before his class. Yet his eyes gleamed, for he too would have his victory come quickly. Not for nothing had he risen so early, long before the sweepers were in the streets. Not for nothing had he crossed from the City to the Army Cantonment, and heard his sandalled steps beat out hollowly in the Cantonment Lines. This Army area brought back memories of the British Raj—the Empire that had conquered all India, and which at that time had also contained what was now his beloved Pakistan, the 'House of the Holy'.

'Sahib Jensen,' he said solemnly and feelingly, 'you are in deep trouble.' His eyes showed liquid

sympathy. Had he been a Catholic he would have crossed himself. As it was he bowed slightly.

The missionary looked at him keenly. 'Trouble?' he said. 'What trouble, now?'

He knew Shere Khan to be a pessimist by nature. His Muslim friend often came with 'deep troubles' (*bahut museebiten*) only to part with great joy in his heart. 'Oh!' thought the missionary teacher. 'Do I have to bear with him at this hour of the morning?' He knew he should love the man, and endeavoured to do so, but his heart was not in it at this time of the dawn.

'Sahib,' said Shere Khan heavily, 'it is a matter of espionage!' He paused to let the terrible news sink into the white man opposite him.

'Good Lord!' he said. 'Espionage?' The white man was certainly startled. 'Who has been doing the spying?'

'Ah!' said the son of the Khans. 'It is indeed someone close to you.' His eyes looked sad, but there was a gleam behind them. 'It is your own daughter, Elizabeth.'

The missionary was greatly relieved. He knew his daughter of ten years of age could scarcely be involved in deep and murky spying. He tried not to grin. He said solemnly, 'And what has my daughter been up to?'

'It is the Club,' he answered, 'the Cherry Club.' Shere Mahomet Ali was suitably serious. His thin voice rose with emotion. 'It is hard for us to understand one so young having all the things to do with such a Club.' When Shere Khan became excited his head wagged from side to side, and his eastern English became less intelligible. In his excitement, he tripped over consonants and doubled

up on vowels. Even so, the missionary kept a straight face.

In an appropriate voice he asked regarding the source of this nefarious activity. Shere Khan lowered his gleaming eyes.

'We have men who deal with this,' he said. He added grandly, 'It is their Department.'

The white man said, 'C.I.D., eh?'

Shere Khan frowned. He was surprised. Did the missionaries know there was a C.I.D.?

Ha! Did they know there was a C.I.A. and K.G.B.? Did they know anything? The missionary found it easy to read Shere Khan's face and he grinned inwardly.

'Shere Khan,' he said gently, 'please tell me from the beginning.' He decided his time for preparation was doomed. He would give the lesson somehow. He would just have to sacrifice its customary polish.

Shere Khan began the wondrous tale. Someone who gathered papers around the Cantonment, and who could read a little, had taken certain of these scraps to the local police station. There an imaginative *sipahy*—in British times called a *sepoy* or soldier—had scanned them and discovered a certain document which was coded. Highly excited he had shown it to his officer who in turn had commandeered a *tonga* and had had that horse-drawn vehicle move with all dispatch to C.I.D. Headquarters—a place thought to be known only to the initiated, but which in fact was known to the entire community.

At H.Q. the code experts had immediately begun to work on the document, only to be baffled by it. Considering their expertise it is no wonder they thought the 'Elizabeth' signature must stand for some Mata Hari, some devilish woman of great

ingenuity. At first they had not connected that 'Elizabeth' with the Jensen family, but subsequent discoveries of other highly important documents had led them to the conclusion that she was the mastermind behind the spy ring. What they did not know was that this Elizabeth had two smaller sisters, both of whom were quite intelligent. The youngest—Mary—being at the age of six not only did not understand the whole mystery, but was intent on scattering to the wind any and all papers she ever found. It happened that every day—as regular as clockwork—the wind called the *Loo* would rise and send its tremors through the oven-hot Sindh, that southern region of Pakistan which is so hot that the Muslims developed a saying concerning it: 'Oh, Allah!' they would say respectfully, 'when Thou madest Sindh, what reason, then, was there for Thee to make hell?'

The missionary sat back. The news had not left him heavy-hearted, but he knew Shere Khan. An excellent man was this Muslim but quite dumb. He could debate about the Bible and the Koran, and about Mahomet and Jesus. He knew all about Adam, Abraham and Moses, but he was a hardline fundamentalist, an obscurantist of the first order. He knew not logic and its rules. Theologically, he was an infatuated man. The missionary wondered how it was that Shere Khan had come by this news of the nefarious. Even now he saw the impossibility of convincing the man he was wrong.

He addressed the Muslim. 'Shere Khan Sahib,' he asked softly, 'are you a member of the C.I.D.?'

Shere Khan felt the crimson seeping through his sun-tanned cheeks, and he dropped his head a little. It was not that he was ashamed of being in the C.I.D.

Indeed, it wonderfully suited his temperament, and often gave him power beyond the dreams that had been his in his youth. Yet he had always felt something of a stigma in being in the Force. It was akin, of course, to being in the C.I.A., the Gestapo, or the K.G.B. At the same time it gave him notoriety, and as he lived a rather plain life, he did not mind this side of the matter.

He said shortly, 'Yes, Sahib, I am in the C.I.D. Of course, hearing this situation, I hastened to you. I thought that somehow we might clear up the matter and help you.' He felt genuinely sorry for the Christian missionary whose young daughter was involved in a spy scandal. Still, patriotism is patriotism, and the missionary was not a Muslim but a *kaffir*—an infidel. One had to follow one's basic loyalties. There was also that in Shere Khan which could not forgive the missionary his debating triumphs, or his unwavering assurance in a faith which became outdated and outmoded with the advent of Allah's greatest prophet—Mahomet.

Jensen said shortly, 'There is no matter such as you imagine. Use your commonsense my friend. How could a girl of ten be involved in spying? There must be some mistake.'

The C.I.D. man shook his head seriously. 'No mistake at all. Of course your daughter might be a dupe, a pawn in the hands of wicked people, but she is, nevertheless, involved.' Then he delivered his trump card. He asked, 'Does she know Jerry Lewis?'

The missionary tried to keep a straight face. The only Jerry Lewis he could recall was a film actor, a player of comedies. He did not think this was the man referred to by the Intelligence person. Then, as he thought, a certain horror came to him. He

remembered another Jerry Lewis, a missionary, a man with a wooden leg, a man who was an uproarious humorist.

'Oh,' he said, 'Jerry Lewis!'

Shere Khan knew now that he had *got* the missionary. The tears he saw in Jensen's eyes he mistook for remorse and terror. All his beliefs were confirmed. The missionary knew the man who wrote in code to the leader of the Cherry Club. His joy knew no bounds. Soon he would have the missionary under his control, in his grip—so to speak.

'Who,' he asked quietly, 'is this Jerry Lewis?'

The missionary smiled, now fully at ease. 'Oh, he is just a wild man from Denmark and the States.' Jerry had been born in Copenhagen and raised in Texas. He was quite a mixture. He was gentle, ebullient, flamboyant, full of humour and mischief, and a dedicated missionary. He was a bachelor and very fond of young people. He loved the Jensen children and they adored him. He called in at the Cantonment whenever he could, but since he lived at Quetta, so many miles away in Baluchistan, he would write often to them, and—as Jensen knew—in a kiddies' code.

The missionary veiled his mirth. He knew the last thing he must do—indeed the thing he must never do—was to cause Shere Khan to lose face. He liked the man, respected him as a dedicated man of faith, and, though unimpressed by his scholarship, had a deep affection for him. He simply looked upon him as a friend. Even so, the suspicion was dawning on him that Shere Khan intended to make capital out of the spy matter. He was out to discredit the missionary and his beliefs, and to head up a triumph of Islam.

So also thought Shere Khan. His eyes were shining, and even though there was compassion in his voice, he was bringing the matter to a head, to a climax, to its logical triumphant outcome.

'I have to ask you, Jensen Sahib, to bring your daughter, and all documents she has, to the C.I.D. Headquarters in the City. Rather than cause you shame, I will not bring an armed escort. Just see that you comply with my request.' In his excitement his voice had become thinner, more reedy, and again there was a problem with vowels and accentuation.

Jensen Sahib had a fleeting picture in his mind of a solemn phalanx of C.I.D. men in grey, marching into the College compound, arresting his daughter and escorting her away in the sight of the stunned and agonised students and servants. He put a hand over his mouth to conceal a faint smile.

Then he said, 'Now I have to ask you, Shere Khan Sahib, to seat yourself again. I am going to tell you the facts, and we are not coming to C.I.D. Headquarters, and you will not bring an armed escort. I am now going to prevent you becoming the laughing stock both of the Cantonment and the City.'

The Intelligence man certainly heard the words 'laughing stock'. He pricked up his ears. He sat down. The missionary went out for some minutes, and reappeared with one of his daughters—the now famous and infamous Elizabeth—and a small file container. The container he put on the desk, the daughter he seated between Shere Khan and him-self. The daughter smiled sweetly at both of them. The more uncertain she was in life, the more sweetly she would smile. She seemed quite a bit uncertain.

'Elizabeth, dear,' said her father, 'tell Shere Khan

Sahib all about your Cheery Club, your membership of the Club, Jerry Lewis, and your coded letters.'

Elizabeth looked startled. 'You know all about it!' she said with some dismay. Shere Khan felt his pulses quicken. He could tell guilt when he saw it. Had he not observed it in many situations, and over many years?

'Of course I do,' said her father. He smiled. 'I have never cracked the code,' he admitted, 'but I know what it is all about.'

Shere Khan wagged his head with feeling. 'Oh, I am thinking it was called the Cherry Club, but now you are telling me that it is the Cheery Club. Ha! As I thought! It is the place where people come together for drinking alcohol, for immorality and for nefarious purposes such as spying.'

Elizabeth, being ten, could scarcely absorb all this. Jensen could, but he chose to keep his merriment to himself. Even Shere Khan, looking at the sweet and innocent blue eyes staring into his, felt a trifle uneasy. Even he found it difficult to accuse this little fair-haired angel of such practices.

Prompted a second time, the little fair-haired angel began her story. She told of the club they had formed to bring cheer into this world. Something of the compassion of her parents had rubbed off on the daughter, and she had asked her sisters to share the good news of life with others. They had formed a club, and—rightly enough—called it the Cheery Club. 'Be of good cheer!' was their motto from Matthew 9:2 (the Authorised Version, 1611).

They had inducted a number of their little friends—daughters of expatriates who worked on Irrigation, Cement Manufacture, and American Aid. In fact it was a Girls' Club in the main, a foretaste of

the years soon to come when feminism would flourish. It was strange, then, when they made Jerry Lewis an honorary member of their group. Induction had taken place under the greatest secrecy because they knew this special favour could promote jealousy were it to become known.

It was known. The Jensen and other parents thought it a great lark, but they did not know that when letters passed within the country in code—no matter how childish it may have been—these communications would occasion problems for the censors who were employed by the C.I.D. They did not know that vagrant papers would disclose espionage in the wind—in the *Loo*.

In vain did shy little Elizabeth tell her breathless story. In vain did she say that Jerry was only their lovely friend. On the one hand Shere Khan did not believe it all, and on the other he could not afford to believe any of it. His crusade against the false faith was at stake. His honour as an Intelligence man was at stake, and his face was very much at stake.

Arthur Jensen carefully kept his temper. Through many years on the Indian Subcontinent he had learned to do this. He had the history of the British Raj to live down. He was not an Englishman, but an Australian, but links were suspected between the two countries. He had to take upon himself the sins of his forbears. This he did in no cavalier fashion, but, even so, those sins of the British fathers sat lightly upon him.

He asked questions of a simple nature, quietly and persistently. First he questioned Elizabeth. Then he questioned the Intelligence man. 'Do you hear that?' he would ask him, or, 'Do you understand that?' He would not give up. By this time students had begun

to arrive, but he had hopes of tying off the matter quickly and satisfactorily. An hour later the students were being lectured by another teacher, and Elizabeth — whose concentration span had always been a limited one—was close to wilting.

Terror was growing in the mind of Shere Khan but he would not let go. Not for nothing was he a valued member of his Department, but then never had he been questioned by anyone like Jensen Sahib. Although the fans above him were spinning merrily, yet the Muslim scholar found himself to be quite hot. The perspiration had soaked his indigenous grey cloth *shalwar* and *kameez*—the customary Pakistani dress. His handkerchief moved nervously from hand to hand.

'Shere Khan Sahib,' said Jensen gently, but firmly, 'I am about to ask Elizabeth to crack the code for you.'

'Crack the code!' Shere Khan could not contain his excitement. With this code broken open, he could go through the documents, and in no time there would be convictions. Jensen read his mind and sighed inwardly.

Elizabeth was exceptionally sweet, smiling up at the dread member of the Secret Police. She showed him how simple it was—and it was simple! You simply reversed the letters, that is, alternate letters and—there—you had it! The Intelligence man marvelled. His eyes slipped over a page, and in a moment it was all intelligible. He felt triumph growing in him. He had something substantial to show them back in the office. He had been strong enough to force these people to yield up the code!

One matter puzzled him; when he read the letter it was wholly innocuous. His eyes gleamed, his mind

raced. He asked himself, 'Could there be a code beneath the code?' This question he addressed to the missionary who seemed inclined to groan aloud, to wring his hands, and then to throw up his arms in despair.

Miraculously this was what he did not do. He simply looked at his daughter and asked softly, 'Do you have a code beneath the code?'

She looked puzzled. The thought was beyond her. Even the C.I.D. man could see that. 'Never mind,' he said. He knew his men would find a code beneath the code—if it were there.

Jensen knew he had ten minutes before his next period of lecturing. Having lost one period he felt he should save the next. He also knew that if he did not do something drastic he would have Shere Khan on his doorstep daily, and often, nightly. He knew someone less stupid but more bureaucratic than Shere Khan might be put on the case. He knew all about red tape, and the ability of Departmental minds to get confused. He had better do the drastic thing—*now!*

'Shere Khan Sahib,' he said firmly, 'how would you like to be the laughing stock of this great city—both Cantonment and City areas?'

Shere Khan's eye widened. He protested. 'Are you trying to threaten me?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Jensen, 'very much so. Do you know that the District Commissioner is my very good and personal friend?'

If it were possible, the C.I.D. man's eyes opened even wider. 'You know the Commissioner?' he asked in surprise.

'We dine together once a month,' said the missionary. 'He reads my books. I read from his library.'

We exchange views. We have become the closest of friends.'

'Then I am sorry that his Excellency will have to be told about your links with spying,' said Shere Khan, but he did not sound convincing, even to himself.

'The Commissioner is a very astute and highly educated man,' said the missionary. 'He will understand this matter in a few moments.' He felt tempted to add, 'Which is more than you could,' but he desisted. 'Doubtless the Commissioner will inquire into the ability of a certain C.I.D. investigator, and when he sees the children's code he will laugh uproariously, but then he might not accept the foolishness of one of his underlings.'

Shere Khan suddenly found the temperature of the day to have escalated rapidly. Even so, he determined not to be bluffed by the man opposite him.

Jensen lapsed into Urdu—the highly respected tongue of the Moguls, the Muslim conquerors of India—and the official language of the State of Pakistan. '*Mera piara dost,*' said the missionary, '*mang ap see mahobbit rackta hung, purr agr ap apney ackle istimal na kerey, to mang ap kwo ittna sharraminda karounga—sari dunia key samney—ki ap apni sari zindagi may khabi nehie bahal karengy.*' 'My dear friend, I love you, but if you don't use your intelligence I will so shame you before the whole world that you will never recover in your lifetime.'

The conversation in Urdu seemed to alarm the Intelligence man immediately, and his obstinacy gave way to earnest listening.

The missionary went on, 'Do you know Mahomet Rhumal Shah of *The City Gazette*?'

Shere Khan acknowledged that he did. There was a certain misery in his eyes.

'Well,' proceeded Jensen, 'he also is a friend of mine, though I understand he is no great friend of the C.I.D. I will deliver this file of letters to him, give him the opened code, and explain the situation that my daughter of ten is regarded as a wily Mata Hari. For his part, my friend, the Editor, will publish the lot in his *The City Gazette*. Now, Shere Khan, what do you think about that?'

Shere Khan made a last feeble effort. 'You would try to threaten an officer of the State?' he asked. 'You would use these means to get me to drop the case?'

'Yes,' said the missionary, 'I would. It is no threat of course. It is simply the truth.' He looked at the Intelligence man, gathered up the file, and stood. 'Feel free to go,' he said, 'and I will feel free to see the Commissioner and the Editor of *The City Gazette*.'

A deep sorrow came into the eyes of the C.I.D. officer. His eyes roved over the marvellous books with their dignified bindings. He remembered the long and friendly talks he had had with this man of integrity. He wondered how he had come to believe this calumny, and then bring it upon such a religious family. With his sorrow was the biting fear, also, that he had been both wrong and foolish.

He said very quietly, though with a touch of sullenness, 'I will not pursue the case.' The missionary was at last on firm ground. Now he could rehabilitate this mistaken man.

'My dear and beloved friend, Shere Mahomet Ali Khan, scholar of Islam, and friend of all the People of the Book, you only did your duty. Anyone would have made that mistake. My daughters were entirely

unaware that coded letters must not be written in another country, especially a country that fears invasion from its neighbours. All this they did in ignorance. My friend Jerry Lewis likewise did his part in ignorance, thinking only to give encouragement to his young friends.

'I know now that you are convinced that it was but childish play, something derived from the Biggles and the Blyton books of the West. We are loyal to your President and his Government and always will be. For this reason I will not speak either to the District Commissioner, or to the Editor of *The City Gazette*, Mahomet Rhumal Shah. My lips shall close tightly over this secret which—henceforth—is just between you and me.'

He smiled quietly. 'In fact, Shere Mahomet Ali Khan, the matter is both closed and forgotten.'

Arthur Jensen proffered the Cheery Club file-box to the man from the C.I.D. 'Take these,' he said, 'peruse them, and get your assistants to go through them. You will find nothing but child's play in them, but they will satisfy you and your Department. They will also prove our integrity.'

Shere Khan looked at his missionary friend, and smiled. He gently refused the file, shifted his handkerchief from right to left hand and offered his right hand to be shaken. There was a solemn moment for both. Shere Khan apologised for having kept the lecturer from his classes.

Jensen smiled. 'Not to worry,' he said. 'It has been good for us to extend our friendship. Such an honest encounter can do nothing but good.'

Shere Khan backed away, bowing slightly. He was wondering how the Commissioner could read the books of the infidel, and then remembered that he,

himself, had read many of them, and with great interest.

One of the students had called for a *tonga*, and the Intelligence man was seating himself in it when the missionary came running. He had a shiny hard-backed book in his hand. He thrust it into the other man's lap.

'Thought you might like to read it,' he said. 'This is one that the Commissioner read. Please keep it.'

Shere Khan felt the last tremors of his shame depart. He knew the man was genuine in his affection. It puzzled him how such a man—not knowing the Prophet—could be so kind, but he accepted the fact. In a moment he was lost to the *tonga* driver, to the rapidly fading Cantonment, and indeed to all things as he came back to his beloved pursuit of the truth. Shere Mahomet Ali Khan was in his element as he extended his scholarship from the shiny hard-backed book given to him by its author.

The Lion on the Road

UP THERE,' the men were saying, 'there is a lion on the road.'

Others who were travelling with them did not think this was a strange phenomenon.

'There are lions aplenty around there,' they were answering, and feeling themselves quite knowledgeable into the bargain.

'This is different,' the spokesman of the first group was explaining. 'You see, this lion has killed a man; the man is lying on the road and the lion does not eat him.'

'The lion does not eat him!' some repeated with wonder. 'This is, as you say, quite a strange happening.'

'Beside the dead man and the lion is an ass. The lion also does not eat him.'

Someone observed, 'The lion stands with his legs apart and he is looking ahead all the time, as though he is seeing something or someone.'

One man shook his head as though the happening were beyond belief. 'How would a lion desist from eating both the ass and the man, if he were a true lion?'

'That he is a true lion cannot be in doubt. Yet he does not roar as lions do before coming up from the prey. The lion is silent.'

'Great God!' one of the travellers said. 'We have heard something strange this day, something we have never before seen.'

'If you wish to see it,' said the spokesman of the first group of men, 'then you should turn around and go to where the lion, the man and the ass are, silent upon the road.'

The second group was most anxious to witness this marvellous happening so they listened carefully to the instructions and set out in the right direction.

They talked incessantly about the matter but as they were drawing near to where the event had taken place they became a trifle uneasy. Their uneasiness increased when they saw in the distance what might well be the lion, the ass and the dead man. They were wondering whether they should approach such a situation, and whether the lion might suddenly bound towards them before they could flee, and, seizing one or other of them, also make a further human kill.

After a time their uneasiness dissolved. The lion was unseeing so far as they were concerned. He was just standing there, not roaring, but somehow making a point.

Some of the men were wise. They were elders in their own village.

'This is a prophetic happening,' they were saying. 'This is a parable of a kind.'

Others agreed sagely, nodding their heads. 'It is indeed a strange day in our land,' they said. There were also other happenings which were making the day strange.

Not one of them could stand there without a sort of holy fear invading them. As men express themselves when they do not fully understand, they muttered and murmured and even sighed, for there was no interpretation of the event. Often, in such cases,

the interpretation is inside a person but he—or she—cannot verbalise it.

They turned back towards their homes, shaking their heads over the mystery, and chattering away to relieve the strange tension which had built up within them.

As they were going they saw a man on an ass coming towards them. He appeared to be agitated and in a great hurry, so they stepped aside to allow him to pass. He did not seem to see them. His eyes were burning strangely, his forehead was wrinkled with intense thought, and he was urging his ass to go faster, kicking it with his heels. The ass was nigh unto trotting, and the men knew this was a special case.

When the rider had passed, one of the men gave a great cry.

'It is the prophet of Bethel,' he said, 'the seer of the northern kingdom.'

In their lands were two kingdoms, one in the north and one in the south. Not long before, a leader among the people had risen against the established king and had taken ten of the twelve tribes to follow him. The ten tribes had always gone down south to the central sanctuary to worship their God, and the new king of the ten tribes had fashioned two new sanctuaries, or 'shrines' as they might be called. The traditionalists were strongly against both the division and the new sanctuaries.

Prophets, as always, simply rise within the nation, from the people. They do not have acceptance by the ecclesiastical powers, nor the powers called 'political'. They receive no stipend. They live in their own prophetic world, so to speak. Such was the seer of Bethel, also known as 'the man of God of Bethel'.

Someone said, 'He is a wise man, this prophet of ours.'

Some muttered away about him being a stooge of the new king, but others shook their heads. They did not agree.

'He is an astute fellow,' they said. 'He plays a watching and a waiting game. One day we will hear from him. I think our rebel king will have to watch himself.'

Hurrying, hurrying was the agitated prophet. The group of men followed him, their legs trying to keep up with the trotting ass. Breathless, they arrived almost at the same time as the seer.

He tumbled out of his saddle, and stood on the road. He was a brave man, for he simply stared at the lion as though unafraid. The lion was standing as before, that is, as though he were not seeing the spectators who came and went. The prophet had raised his hands in the air, and was in deep emotion. Disregarding the lion he knelt by the mauled man. He lifted his head and looked into his dead, staring eyes. The dead man's ass stood as stock still as the lion. They made a strange quintet, the lion, the ass, the mauled man, the prophet of Bethel and his animal. The group at the side of the road stood as though frozen. They were deep into something they could not comprehend.

Then the seer gave a great sigh. He began to weep. His arms were about the dead man and he was lifting him to his breast. He raised his voice and cried, 'Alas, my brother!' This statement he kept repeating, and the watching men were strangely moved at the love and pity and compassion that was flowing from their prophet. The prophet was a man of great strength

and he lifted the slain corpse and laid it across the silent ass. He mounted his own beast, scarcely nodded to the watching men, and began his home journey, leading the corpse-laden animal.

As the men watched this curious happening the lion on the road seemed to disappear. None saw it go, but it must have padded off whilst they were watching the seer disappear into the distance. There was much shaking of the heads, many more mutterings and murmurings, and all gave vent to their feelings and impressions by agreeing, again, that they had seen strange things that day.

The man from Bethel was trotting as fast as he could go, and the second ass seemed to accept the leading. The mind of the prophet was boiling, and so were his bowels within him, for this was the way his people and his generation described human agitation. He kept giving side glances at the dead man and saying over and over, 'Alas, my brother! Alas, my brother!' Sometimes the tears flowed fast and plentifully but they brought little relief. The prophet was seeing afresh what he had seen but a day or two before.

It had all happened at Bethel. This place had always been a sacred site, hallowed by many events which had been absorbed into the culture of the district, and, indeed, of the nation in its undivided state. The ancient Patriarchs had worshipped there because their God had appeared to them in various ways known as theophanies. Unlike other cultures they had no idols, no material symbols of their deity. This was a source of puzzlement and the cause of much head-shaking by those of other cultures who lived

near these people who had met their God at Bethel. Even within the people of the seer there had been those who had tried to symbolise their God with the shape of a bull, but the holy leaders so raged against this form of desecration and blasphemy that they had desisted. Even so, they itched to have a form by which they could symbolise their God. Of course they would not worship the symbol, but only by means of it.

In the recent happenings of history, the symbolists had their wish granted. The king who had led the ten tribes away from the ancient sanctuary in the south was astute enough to know that traditionalists would want to worship, so he had made the two new sanctuaries, one in the southern and one in the northern region of his kingdom. Bethel was the southern site of the new northern kingdom. Most of the surrounding nations worshipped a strong bull-like idol which was the essence of power and strength. This god had a consort, a fascinating female symbol that enlivened first sensuality and then sexuality in worship. When the new king fashioned two bull calves of pure gold, many were delighted. They had always been a bit self-conscious of not having a visible, sculptured deity like other cultures, and on this score they had sometimes been called atheists. One golden image was placed in the north and one in the south and the two seemed to enclose the population in itself. The old-fashioned sanctuary in the deeper south—the other kingdom—now became outmoded.

The two new sanctuaries were cunningly fashioned. They not only brought nostalgic joy to the new worshippers, but they substituted wonderfully for their unseen deity. The king was astute enough

to shape contemporary worship, and to ordain priests and their assistants who were competent to catch the people into a worship which combined the best of the old with the innovative new.

The prophet was running this through his mind. He was thinking of the day when the king had stood at the new altar to dedicate it, and to begin the adoration of the golden calf. This was a traditional day of a festival in the old sanctuary further south, and so the king of the north had made the time of dedication to be one of great feasting, of spectacular bloody animal offerings, and the sweet smell of the incense wreathed about the people as they gathered for this high day. There was a delightful feeling of festivity in the air. Thousands had gathered in anticipation of a great celebration with food and drink for all, and, doubtless, later singing and dancing for the celebration.

The prophet of Bethel had not gone to that feast. Sooner or later the king would seek him out and demand why the seer had been absent and so he would be at the mercy of the monarch. His stomach had no time for the king's innovations, but he was also a puzzled man. Somehow his unseen deity had not yet pronounced a word against the apostate king. The prophet was not going to risk his neck by stating his own objections, his ideas and his opinions. Either his God would tell him what to say or he would keep silent.

The seer's sons had come home from the worship-event, and they were agog with excitement and terror. They described the happenings to their father whose eyes began to gleam, and whose bowels began boiling within him. His ears had pricked up, his face

glowed and his eyes had a new light in them. His soul was beginning to make glee. The descriptions of the event bubbled out of his sons, and he held up a hand. He pointed to his oldest son, selecting him to be the reporter.

'You tell me everything, and in every detail. Speak slowly. I want to know what happened.'

The son said, 'A man of God came from Judah. Like you, Father, he was a prophet. We were all there to see the king burn incense at the altar and to lead us into new ways of the old worship. As you well know, the altar is solid, being built by the best stonemasons, and the fire was hot upon it, white hot in fact, the great round stones of it glowing.'

The father nodded, a trifle impatiently. 'And then—?' he said.

'And then this seer of Judah came up to where the king was at the altar. At first he ignored the king, and began to speak to the altar.'

'Yes! Yes!' the father said.

'The seer of Judah spoke to the altar. He said, "O altar, altar, thus says the Lord: 'Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and he shall sacrifice upon you the priests of the high place who burn incense upon you, and men's bones shall be burned upon you.'"

'And then, Father, this amazing thing happened.' The son was trembling. 'The prophet said, "This is the sign that the Lord has spoken: Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are upon it shall be poured out." When the king heard these blasphemous words he pointed to the man of Judah and cried out, "Lay hold of him."

'Father, it was incredible. The hand which the king pointed at him dried up, withered, and became useless. He could do nothing. Then, unbelievably, Father, the white-hot stones and fire came tumbling down from the altar and there was a terrible noise and the altar split and its masonry shattered. Nothing but rubble remained. All the time the king was standing with his outstretched arm and his withered hand. It was uncanny.'

The heart of the prophet of Bethel went hot and then cold. He stared at his son. 'Yes, son,' he said impatiently, 'and what happened next?'

'The king was terribly frightened and he cried out to the man of Judah to pray to the Lord to heal his hand. His voice was like a shriek.

'We all went silent. Everyone was watching. I was still hearing the cries of the cattle in the compound, but now even they were stilled, and we all waited, our hearts in our mouths. It was awesome.

'The man of Judah prayed to the Lord for the king and we watched the life coming back into his hand. He was healed. The king asked the prophet home. He was going to give him food and drink and a great reward.'

The old seer could not take his eyes off his son. He gestured impatiently.

The son said, 'The prophet told the king off, good and proper. He would have none of his treatment. He told him that even if the king offered him half his house he would not go near it. He said his God had warned him not to eat and drink in this northern kingdom. He was to return to Judah by the way he had come.'

'Yes! Yes!' said the old man, 'and then what happened?'

The son shrugged his shoulders. 'He just went, Father. That was the last we saw of him.'

The old man was shaking. 'Which way did he go?' he asked urgently.

The son indicated the way. His father was still trembling, as he ordered his son, 'Saddle up the ass for me.'

The son did this. The old man leapt on to the animal and hurried it along the road. His heart was beating fast. Almost without warning he saw the man of Judah seated under an oak tree, resting.

'Are you the man who has come from Judah?' he asked.

The other man nodded. 'I am he,' he said.

The prophet of Bethel said, 'Come home with me and eat bread.'

The seer from Judah shook his head. 'My God has given me strict orders not to eat bread or drink water with you or any other. By the way I came is the way I must return.'

A prophet knows a prophet. That is how it is. The spirit of a prophet is subject to the spirit of another prophet. Now the Bethel seer became cunning. He had a plan in his mind which must be one of the most preposterous of all that prophets have known. He was about to lie and to use his seer's credibility in order to do that. This was the substance of his lie: 'I also am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord, saying, "Bring him back with you into your house that he may eat bread and drink water."' '

The lie succeeded. The prophet followed him trustingly which is something a prophet must never do, for prophets must get their direction from their God, stick to the directions, and if these seem to

change, then to make sure they are not being deceived.

Now, as the seer of Bethel trotted towards home, leading the ass that carried the dead prophet, he ruminated over his lie. In one way he was sorry for its outcome but in another, very, very excited. One part of him was weeping, 'Alas, my brother! Alas, my brother!' but the other was saying, 'Oh, it is true! It is true!'

He remembered that while they were having that meal suddenly the word of the Lord had come to him—the prophet of Bethel. It was the word which had excited him. As a prophet he had coveted that thrilling experience. Not often does God speak to any prophet and when he does joy rides high, the ecstasy is unspeakable, and the holy vocation is again vindicated. One word from one's God, even if it happens only once in a lifetime, is worth the living of the whole life.

He had fixed his eyes on the remarkable man from Judah and said, 'Thus says the Lord, "Because you have disobeyed the word of the Lord, and have not kept the commandment which the Lord your God commanded you, but have come back and eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which he said, 'Eat no bread and drink no water'; your body shall not come to the tomb of your fathers.'"

The man of Judah had looked at him comprehendingly. One prophet knows another, and the communication of each from his God is a perpetual wonder. The seer of Bethel saw no great disturbance in the face of his deceived brother, but perhaps that man was keeping his own counsel. In one hour his fellow-seer had both lied and told the truth. The

man of Bethel had wondered then, as he was wondering now, whether his fellow-prophet had discerned the purpose of the lie.

As the two asses trotted along, led by the one man, so the Bethel seer bemoaned his brother. His thoughts he kept to himself. Perhaps he would never unfold these thoughts to another. When he arrived at the house he said nothing of the matter to his sons. He asked their help and together the men set out for what was the intended tomb of the prophet of Bethel. His sons helped him to place the man of Judah in the burial cave and seal the opening. Lifelong they would remember the deep mourning of their father over the seer from Judah. Judah to them was a long way away. It was the kingdom of the despot who had caused his own people to rebel and follow the king of the golden calves. Perhaps they wondered at the action of their father in bringing the prophet home, feeding him only for that seer to perish at the hands of the lion. As they thought of the lion, their skins prickled. The whole thing had been uncanny. Now, so to speak, like the tomb, the event was sealed off for ever. They had honoured the deceived prophet in his death.

Now their father was speaking to them, 'When I die, bury me in the grave in which this man of God is buried, lay my bones besides his bones. For the saying which he cried by the word of the Lord against the altar in Bethel, and against all the houses of the high places which are in the cities of this northern kingdom, shall surely come to pass.'

On the way back the old man rode his ass and kept his thoughts to himself. His sons knew that the man of God from Judah had prophesied that the priests

would be sacrificed on the false altars, and even the bones of the dead apostate priests would be burned to ashes and the dust of them whirled into the air and carried away so that there would be no remembrance. They perceived the wisdom of their astute father: he had planned well. His bones would never be disinterred for they would lie forever beside the seer from the south, and whilst the people most often killed the prophets, they had great reverence for them in their dead state.

As for the father, there was great exultation in his heart. He had not been wholly convinced that the prophet from Judah was necessarily authentic. The happenings at the altar should have been enough to convince him, but he had needed further proof. Every age has its mavericks, and tricks can be concocted as though they are supernatural. He reasoned that if the God of Judah had sent his servant into the northern kingdom to pronounce doom to the king, then he—the Bethel prophet—would need to be sure, for his own future ministry lay in knowing whether the same God of both prophets was concerned for the future judgement of the kingdom of the two golden calves. Since the prophet had said that God had forbidden him to eat and drink on the way under pain of death, then he would truly prove to be the prophet of the Most High if his God killed him. His death would authenticate the message. Once it was authenticated then the prophet of Bethel would know the mind of his God. He would know how to relate to the king, and when it was due time to prophesy, he could rightly pronounce the powerful word of the Lord.

His return to the house was with both sorrow and jubilation. The silence of the man of Judah had not been that of despair. He, too, knew the strange ways of his God, the ways of assuring the people of the north that in spite of the partition of the land, He was their God and would abide no apostasy from them. Presently there would be a time of peace, a time for the kingdom to go its own way, but the prophecy would never be reversed. It was surely coming.

'Surely coming' was what the prophet of Bethel muttered to himself. Around him, the world was very beautiful and Bethel, with its ancient history and its sacred sites, was steeped in some holy wonder at this hour. The best was yet to be, but beyond it the worst, and then perhaps another best. He knew not. He knew only the sorrow and the joy at the one time, and, as they blended, the same holy wonder seeped into him. Now there were no false regrets for the death of the southern seer.

Another kind of wonder was growing in his mind as the truth burst on him. 'Why!' he cried in amazement, 'that lion on the road was God's miracle! It was the lion of Judah!' Well, of course it was. There was the man of Judah and the lion of Judah. The lion had not destroyed the seer but had fitted him to be buried honourably in a prophet's tomb. The man of Bethel almost sobbed with the glory of it all. He saw with new eyes a dead prophet on the road, and an ass and a lion standing motionless as though on guard, as though witnessing to the world the truth of the prophet and the culpability of being deceived, of weighing a man's word against the word of his God. That lion may have been a holy angel or even the glorious angel of the Lord who appears at times of great human crisis.

'My!' thought the prophet of Bethel, and he trembled and shuddered. 'There is always a lion on the road when a man or woman of God does not obey wholly the word which comes to him.'

'There is always a lion on the road.' He ruminated on that and bowed his head devoutly, his hands clasped in adoration and holy awe. His lips moved as he prayed fervently, 'May I never cause a lion of Judah to meet me on the road.'

He thought to himself, 'There may be many kinds of lions which meet many kinds of persons on many roads, and we will not always recognise our executioner at first. Later we will know, and then that 'later' will be too late. Even so, the execution will be, in the ultimate, a great mercy.'

The prophet knew this revelation had come to him from his God who could never be typified by idols—so transcendent was He. Had the seer been a writer of lyrics, a singer of songs and a maker of psalms, he would have begun his composing with the first line—a line about a lion! He would have penned that line in the following manner:

'Always there is the lion on the road, so beware!'

He knew of no other god who was, or could be, attendant upon the affairs of humanity.

The Single Sniper

NOISELESSLY he settled into the cupping branches, concealing himself. There were innumerable rubber trees, endlessly stretching in plantation joined to plantation. His nostrils could pick up the smell of boiled latex, cooked rubber. It was a smell he had collected with other smells such as those of the kampongs—whether Chinese or Indian, he knew the difference. He had been trained for that. He had been taught to gather impressions, melt into the land, empathising with it, but then coldly and ruthlessly. Tonight he was huddled into his tree eyefully aware of the lake with its terrified ducks. The sounds of war had unsettled them into strident shrieking, but the sound was softer than the screaming shells. These broke through the trees, shattering branches, spilling the leaves that were like minted coins in the soft silver Malayan moonlight. Back in his own land he had loved the moonlight as it gave white beauty to the sharp hills with their massed conifers. Here, it was just jungle and plantations with typical smells, and the moonlight was dangerous, dangerous as the noisy lake ducks indicating his presence to the enemy.

Hidden, and as silent as he, were his enemies. They had the advantage of quickly dug trenches, hastily gouged machine-gun posts. They knew their territory; they faced their enemy. Yet he had no fear, only huge laughter in his bowels that threatened to

break out and betray him, but he was too astute for that. It kept scornful laughter playing in his eyes and on his Nipponese features, but no one would know that. He, too, had been camouflaged with the soot of the burning oil wells. In this tree he would never be seen. He knew from past practice that in the next moment horrific hell would break loose. The new heavy artillery would shatter the enemy and gouge them out, swerving and dodging the exploding mortars, as they sought to silence the chattering machine-guns.

These sounds were music to him, as were the noises of millions of fire-crackers bursting and the wild cries of 'Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!' as the first wave of his compatriot troops crashed on the bewildered enemy. Their patterns of war—even jungle war—were different. This enemy whom they had once feared had trained differently from Nippon's Eastern cunning and martial brilliance. The British saved their infantry but the Japanese hurled their first wave of men recklessly to draw the fire of the enemy. These were *Kamikaze* fighters shocking the British to disclose their positions, glad to die for the Emperor if that was needed.

As for him and the other snipers, they had made their way soundlessly through the lines of the enemies, had silently positioned themselves above the fighting in the heavily foliated rubber trees. They were to break the morale of the enemy infantry. He knew the sniper force was dreaded, that it had been totally unassailable and that it had turned the tide of many a battle. In his mind he named the places of those battles, beginning at Alor Star in the north, and reaching down to Muar and then to Johore Bahru, finally crossing the Johore Straits by barge and

landing on the North West Sector of Singapore Island.

The last battle he remembered with something of a shudder. Barge-load after barge-load of Nipponese infantry had been decimated by the Australian machine-gunners. There seemed no relief from the bitter, withering fire of the Aussie weapons that chattered and snarled and mowed down the self-styled sacred troops—their enemy—but even these Australian gunners could not stand against the relentless force of numbers and after a time the guns had choked or seized, and the small soldiers had tumbled on to the Island, wrist compasses guiding them to their first destination. The crack troops had followed to mop up, and he had been amongst those, a sacred sniper to irritate and bewilder the enemy.

Dawn was coming and with it his best opportunity to kill. He remembered many dawns, first light breaking quickly on the battle and that first light was always critical for snipers. Previously they had aimed at bursts of red gunfire, but now they saw the enemy, moving forwards or withdrawing strategically. Now he could see the mounds of the machine-gun nests or catch sight of groups firing mortars. In the moment or two before fixing them in his sights he remembered the thrill it always gave him. There was extraordinary joy in steadily aiming, pausing quietly, then pressing the trigger and seeing a man topple. The surprise and the trauma of his victims never ceased to delight him. Of course it was always for the Emperor and his honour, but there was something in it for him, too. Emperor or no Emperor, war or no war, he knew immeasurable delight in the killing of a man. It was as though in his steady brain, in his

clear sight and his steady fingers, an indescribable power resided. Human beings were at *his* mercy, *his* plan and *his* design.

Once it came to him that he had undefeatable power. At first that idea seemed strange, but it grew on him. He had belonged to a shooting club back at home, and that had qualified him to be a marksman, a professional sniper in the conscripted Forces. He knew that in some unspoken way he was admired by the other soldiers. He was special, singled out for an enviable task. So the thought of power had gripped. Sometimes he played a cat-and-mouse game with a lone soldier, one perhaps stunned by the concussion of a bursting shell, but bodily unharmed. He would watch him struggle to his knees, and then to his feet. He could see the bewilderment of the man through his telescopic lens. For huge enjoyment he would fire a round, pinging near the man, and then he could see the horror of the defenceless person. At times they turned and fired blindly in his direction. He would even let them let loose a burst of sub-machine-gun fire. He knew he was hidden, protected, and his delight was in seeing their bewilderment and dread. Then he would aim at the lower part of the soldier who would crash, arms flailing, rifle or gun flying upwards. In steely pity he would finish the soldier off, sending him in a flash to some Valhalla, but the joy was always there like a tide flowing and surging powerfully in his depths.

This night was exceptional to all others he had known. It was as though the enemy now knew the subterfuges, the secret strategy, the flaunting crackers that were intended to frighten. They seemed not to be

frightened. Hoarse cries of 'Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!' served only to stimulate them into more life. He watched with amazement as a group of men charged a Nipponese machine-gun nest. They, too, were crying their strange cries, oaths and imprecations, jeers and savage enmity. He knew little of their language, but he recognised bravery when he saw it, and even if this was from desperation it was genuine. For a moment he had a sinking feeling, a sharp premonition that they might succeed, and that the tide of battle might turn. To his surprise and horror he saw nests of machine-gunners silenced. Even so, his own artillery were pounding with heavy shells, and mortars kept exploding amongst the enemy, but it was as though they had gone mad, were demoniacally set upon destroying Nippon in this part of the battlefield.

It was his time. His clear sight picked them out, one by one, and in this he was not on his own. Other snipers kept up their single fire and with as deadly aim. He saw the arms thrown into the air, the pitching forward of the soldiers in khaki, the helmets rolling aside, the bodies rakishly askew, the shuddering and then the stillness. Usually the rest of the troops would pause, look for the snipers and so open themselves to the aim of their hidden adversaries.

Today this was not so. The British opponents were regaining lost ground, his compatriot soldiers withdrawing, and even fleeing. His anger rose and he played no games with the uncaring enemy infantry. He drew a bead quickly, time and again, and his rifle spat its fury. Silently they dropped, here and there, but with dismay he saw that the others pressed on, determined, unhindered by his victories. His anger grew and he hastened the carnage.

He and his compatriots were not the only snipers. For the first time he met enemy snipers and suddenly, above and close to him, whistled a round. He circled the tree, huddling up against the trunk on a new branch. He could not even sense the direction of the enemy sniper. A few trees away was one of his fellow Japanese snipers, and he felt the horror of the matter when that one pitched out of the tree and lay writhing on the ground, his peaked cap fallen from his head and his tortured features showing up in the dawn. Knowing the risk, but not caring, he sent a bullet into the heart of the man. The Emperor's man would have been glad, had he known. Such a death was honourable. Many times he had watched his own infantry troops killing the wounded, and generally with their Samurai swords. Slash! Slash! Slash! Guttural cries from the killers, moaning from the wounded and dying. It had never occurred to him to question any of it.

Another bullet whistled past him, just above his head, and he shrank back, moulding into the tree-trunk. He wondered at the feelings that were coming to him, a stiff and rigid reaction to an enemy having him in his sights. After a time the sniping ceased—his and the enemy's. The troops had gone so far ahead. He was in territory from which the Nipponese soldiers had withdrawn. He knew what to do, and that was to remain still and silent, making no move, not even one which was faint and could relieve his clenched muscles.

Below him, at the edge of the plantation and on the black ribbon of road there was a wounded Australian. He could tell him by his dress—his badges and regimental colour flashes. He could see he was a sergeant, and had had his right leg badly

smashed as he had run upon the yammering gun in the nest below the road. Now that nest was emptied of danger. Perhaps dead Japanese lay silent in it. A few mortars were lobbing and bursting, sending up dust and smoke. Shells whirred and shrieked overhead, but their target had shifted to the right, beyond this new no-man's land. All the sounds of war were dying away as the enemy advanced and his own troops receded.

Where he was became a land of silence. He stared at the wounded man, and could see he was in terrible pain. The man's own rifle lay alongside him, slightly pointed to his head. The sniper seemed to know what the wounded man was thinking. He was thinking of pressing the trigger of his rifle, so quickly finishing the pain, and thus freeing himself from the danger of a Nipponese officer coming upon him, using his Samurai sword to bring painful death. The sniper had watched his own Nipponese officers go into a frenzy of blood lust, hacking at the defenceless wounded soldiers, uttering hoarse and horrible cries, until the wounded were lifeless. Even after such deaths, some still hacked at the helpless bodies, as though to demean them.

In the comparative silence that followed, his mind began to work in strange ways. He sensed there could be Allied snipers still in the trees, but they were far from his thought. What was strange was that he was asking himself for the first time why it was that he and these enemy were fighting. His mind had been conditioned to treat his homeland and its Emperor as sacred. Even so, he was asking himself a question, and the fact of the asking disturbed his conditioned mind. He sensed uneasily that if he pursued the

question then he would find himself in a place foreign to his usual thinking. He retreated to familiar ground—his art and love of killing. He watched the Aussie soldier in his agonies, blood flowing from his body on to the road. It was not pity which made him desist from firing, but the danger that there might be an enemy sniper or two still left in the trees. His finger itched, and so did his mind. Almost reflexively he would have shot the soldier, first to see him jerk and convulse, and yet not to kill him. He was back, in his mind, at the cat-and-mouse play. Even so, he wondered because he found himself shivering, and because of a sudden storm breaking into his mind.

The morning was not cold; to the contrary, it was hot. The sun blazed across the broken soil, and where the plantation trees had been slashed from artillery and mortar fire. All around him the dead were very dead, Nipponese and Australian. Some of them may have been feigning death but his keen sight did not convince him that this was the case. It was the wounded sergeant who somehow worried his mind. He was not sure that some pity had come to him for the man who led the charge against the machine-gun nest. Then he remembered his feats on the Peninsula, and something savage within him stirred. He would like a fresh visitation of the joy, exultancy and power that had gripped him in former events. The memory was heady, the impulse strong. He shifted slightly to create a better aim. Then the terror he had known in this battle returned to him. He found himself trembling and sweating. It was as though there were rigours in his brain. Something of himself protested against the senseless death he had known over the past weeks. It told him his sense of greatness was trivial, that it was murder in effect,

and that human beings were made for better things. Better things! Better things? The phrase was like a hammer in his head, battering his conditioned thinking.

He found himself viewing the wounded soldier with high respect, and not as a hated enemy. Both of them had been caught in a maelstrom and both had in some sense been the victims of their races, their governments, their traditions, their historic circumstances. He scarcely realised that he was going through the routine which millions of fighting men and women had known all through human history, inscrutable human history. It struck him as curious that the man lying with his rifle pointed at his own head might be thinking the same. The thought made his sweat turn to ice on his skin, and nameless terror arose afresh in his brain. He fought the heresy that was attacking him, struggling to get back to his traditional thinking, his cultural patterns that encouraged him to kill, but he was amazed and even frightened by some power within him that was telling him he was wrong, that all were wrong who fought their dreadful wars and savaged their enemies. He was amazed that he could have such thoughts, and wondered at their origin.

The stillness bored into his head, making his ears hum and his eyes ache. The war was miles away from him, even though a Zero plane or two wheeled and droned in the cloudless blue far to the north. The fever he was feeling troubled him. At odds with himself, he did not know what to do.

Below the tree and not far from the sniper, the wounded soldier was keeping his eyes closed. He

knew there might be an enemy sniper, and that one movement from himself might draw fire from the deadly rifle. He could still recall the yammering of the machine-gun he had hated, but since death was so near, the silence told him that no sounds mattered. Nothing mattered but the death which was so close. He had considered pressing the trigger of his own rifle, but thought it might further maim his head or body without killing him. Also, from some far away world a command kept hammering him, 'Thou shalt not kill! Thou shalt not kill!' Surely one could kill oneself: surely one was free to kill oneself in such hopeless circumstances, but the injunction was biting even into his nerves. He controlled himself to lie still. He was not afraid of death, only of the manner of that death. He could bear the pain of the smashed limb, but that was enough. Enough was enough, and death could be merciful where agony was intolerable.

The sniper thought he heard a movement, but a movement that was so faint that it might not be one. Suddenly, out of a tree flashed a golden oriole. Its quick sharp movements took him by surprise and its gurgling song startled him so that he looked upwards. Then his body froze as he saw not a golden oriole but a blackened face with the whites of the eyes staring through the sooted cheeks and brow. He had only a brief second to see the eye of the rifle pointed at him. Had unusual fear not frozen him he would have acted more quickly. He must have had only a flash of a moment to think all his thoughts, but it was sufficient for him to know his end was near. His mind raced back to his own exultancy at the killings he had done, the joy throbbing in his veins

and the sense of power over all things—even over any deity which might exist. In that same flash he knew what he had done with his life was first trivial and then dreadful. He had just a moment to reflect on the strange thing within him which had pro-tested at his lethal profession, which had told him that it wasn't really human—humanity at the stretch—to kill and to do it without mercy. His spirit cringed at the ruthlessness now bearing down upon him—the same heartlessness by which he had lived and slaughtered others and brought about horrible human indignity. It had all been wrong, and for nothing! The moment of horror expanded into an eternity of thinking, of shock regarding himself, and of a sickening sense of the race of humanity which could continuously kill without authentic reason.

The other sniper, the large and powerful Australian, concealed in the foliage of the rubber tree, but emotionless of eyes and passive of face, was slowly pressing the trigger, knowing a trembling moment might spoil his aim and swiftly bring death on himself. He was thinking:

'Bloody Jap! Bloody, bloody Jap! He's playing cat-and-mouse with my Sarge. Cruel bastard. He'll never get away with it! Here goes.'

His own body was stiff from the hours of silence and frozen non-movement. He, too, had gone through the weary argument concerning killing, the senselessness of war, but then the reality of it. It was as though he had lived a long sigh in himself and it was about to burst into action: forced action, because all the events which had brought this moment in history were beyond his control; even beyond his will. It seemed that a merciless fate was inbuilt to

human history. He wondered wearily at that because he had never been curious about fate; only about destiny. His mind had told him that this lone sniper was a human being back in Nippon as he himself was one back in Oz. Maybe the little yellow man was a warm husband, a gentle father, but even as he felt helpless about the matter a thought of the blood of the past weeks seemed to flow afresh before his eyes, and the inner anger surged, the trigger finger further—but delicately—was tightening. Tightening. Tightening. Tightening. Tightening.

It was almost as though the Nipponese sniper had time to see the bullet coming straight at him, as though he knew it would bore into his forehead and then into the brain, that it would explode and thrust him out into intense light, and then deadly darkness. All the time the rest of him was frozen and with the impact of the enemy bullet he convulsed, stiffened, and then slipped from his branch. Dead, he did not feel the branches tear at him or bump him away, as they finally let him fall, not far from the soldier who had refused even to whimper.

That wounded man watched the falling with weary amazement. The whole movement was in slow motion—unexpected. He had sensed the Nipponese was present, and he had thought endlessly about him, but what he now saw was the indignity of death. Long ago he had finished the tussle of his own death. He had known that not much more blood had to flow before he would be eased into painlessness and find oblivion. Even so, a pang of pity for the collapsed Jap before him visited his tired mind. It was even in his heart, and it seemed to spread across the race to which they both belonged.

The Aussie sniper slipped to the ground and came to his section sergeant, and his eyes were filled with satisfaction, yet there was pity for this man he had loved, whom he had tried to protect. He had somehow known there had been only one enemy sniper, and had felt a curious oneness with that lone foreign enemy. At the same time he knew a huge sorrow for which he could not account. He looked at his section NCO.

'I'll be back, Sarge,' he said softly. Then he used the name unfamiliar to his lips but always in his brain. 'I'll be back quickly, Goddie. We need a stretcher and a few fellows. We'll get you to that hospital.'

The wounded man smiled gently. The sniper tumbling out of the tree had brought relief to his tensed mind. He knew that his own blood would run out to its limit before his friend, Tod, would be back, but he still had a hope that he would live. He felt grey waves of unconsciousness begin to flow over him, and the pain was being stopped by the new invasion. He smiled again before Tod turned and ran. He kept smiling, even when the darkness blotted out the sun, and the pain in him might have ceased forever.

Oh, Jezebel!

ROSCOE is my devil's advocate. I put my ideas to him, and he sets out to refute them. If he can find a hole in my argument he shoots me, good and proper. This day the lines of a Negro spiritual were on my brain. Tunes must get on your brains too, like they do on mine. So I did a little research into the story of this lady.

I said to Roscoe, 'Jezebel was quite a lady.'

He found a hole at once: only a little hole, of course. 'She was no lady, Hermann,' he said, 'she was only a jumped-up harlot.'

'Careful Roscoe,' I said. He knew my tone so he hesitated. He has never liked holes in his arguments. He is a very clever devil's advocate.

'No?' he asked.

'She was a lady. She was a queen,' I said.

He nodded slowly. 'But, Hermann, being a queen does not make one a lady.'

'The first lady of the land,' I said. 'What do you say to that?'

'That doesn't make her a true lady,' he said. 'Only an official one.'

'Wait and see,' I said. 'She was one of the cleverest ladies in all history.'

'Cleverest of women,' he insisted. 'A clever woman.'

I conceded slightly. 'Women,' I said. 'She was a woman.'

'Being a woman is a lot,' he said, 'especially these days.'

My name is Hermann Schmaltz. I come from a long line of Teutonic thinkers, especially theological thinkers. Now don't put the story down because it is linked with theology. In our seminary we have brilliant men, and most of them are humble, and some are simple, but out in the workaday world they would be getting big salaries, bigger than in the semi-nary. Of course we have our failures too, and some who are just mediocre.

So what would the matter of Jezebel have to do with us today, especially in the world called 'secular'? Just the fact that there is no such world. Every human being is a theologian—of sorts, of course. The most powerful theologians are atheists, and the laziest are agnostics. Stir one of them and you have a theological fight on your hands without doubt. For example, if you call me religious I will react strongly. You will have a fight. I am at war with religion but not with faith.

To get back to Jezebel: Roscoe was arguing for the fact that she was sexy and promiscuous.

'Proof,' I demanded. 'I mean real proof.'

'She was painted,' he said. 'She had her face painted.'

I laughed at that. 'How many females, students or staff, are not painted?'

He puzzled. He understood. He grinned. 'Quite right,' he said. 'It's a billion-dollar industry: cosmetics.'

'She was painted for a special occasion,' I said. 'Only once is she described as being painted. That was

a royal occasion. Politics, you might call it but nothing really sexy.'

He remembered and nodded. 'Queens painted themselves into royal beauty on such occasions.'

'Secondly,' I said, 'when—or where—does it say this woman was promiscuous?'

He nodded a little gloomily. 'Come to think of it, no evidence along that line.'

'Well there is,' I said to encourage him. 'There is something on a bigger scope, so to speak.'

'So to speak?' he queried.

I said to my brilliant colleague whose forte is history, 'What were her beginnings? How did she come into the picture?'

He thought for a while, and then he said, 'She married Ahab the king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. She was the daughter of Ethbaal of Sidon and he was quite a man. He was a priest-king. First he was high-priest of Astarte the consort of Baal, and was somehow linked with the Tyrian Asherah. He was not content with being the priest of Baal in Sidon. He set out to be king. He killed the king of Tyre and took Phoenicea.'

I admit I am not much on history but I had studied this one. 'Tell me,' I said, 'all about this Astarte or Asherah and about the male deity Baal.'

'Gods of fertility,' he said briefly. 'These had a hot lot going. Sexual worship for fertility and temple prostitutes.'

'Not a nice lot,' I said.

'That was how they thought in those days,' he said. He kept looking at me, knowing of my weakness in history. 'Would you like to hear a story?' he asked.

'I want to hear a story,' I said.

'Goes something like this,' he replied. There was a gleam in his eyes.

'The myth is that the wicked god Mot defeated Baal in battle and ordered him to descend to the underworld. Baal had as his consort a goddess by the name of Anat who was his sister and they came together to produce progeny before his descent into the nether world. Anat found him and buried him on the Sapan, the holy mountain of the gods. Mot was the deity who brought aridity to earth, reducing it to a scorched state, whereas Baal was the god of the clouds and storms, bringing refreshment to the soil and all things. Anat attacked Mot, cut him up with a sword, burned him in fire, ground him with millstones and scattered his remains in the field for the birds to eat. Baal eventually appeared and with him again came the rain, crops, fecundity and life, but the battle between Mot and Baal is seen in the alternatives of aridity and fertility. This was the cycle they had repeatedly, and it explained the seasons. When the land burned, Mot reigned: when the heavens rained, Baal reigned, always aided by Anat.'

He looked at me and grinned. 'Gets quite complicated,' he said, 'because Anat helps Baal to fight Mot so that the crops are good whereas the female deity Asherah helps Mot to defeat Baal. But things change, and when a house is built for Baal then he and his consort-sister bribe Asherah to help against Mot.'

He grinned again. 'What is more confusing is that goddesses vary from culture to culture. Asherah is identified with the Babylonian Ishtar who was a powerful fertility female deity. It all boiled down to calling the female deities by the collective name of Asherim.'

'The sum of it is,' I said, 'fertility of nature and of humans.'

'That,' Roscoe agreed, 'is the sum of it.'

'And Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal the king-priest of Phoenicia was addicted to the Baal-Asherah idolatry?'

Roscoe said that she was addicted, very addicted. 'Obsessed, is the word,' he said.

We agreed that the great king Solomon had started the rot. He had many wives and concubines, just about countless in number. Many of these were beautiful and they brought their religious cultures with them, including the deities. All cultures had their gods and idols. So it was religion and politics in the one bundle. Solomon worshipped the Ashteroth (Asherah of Sidon).

'If you wonder how that kind of religion gets people in,' Roscoe said, 'then go to a modern rock concert. Ever noticed how they worship? Sensuality is the key word; sensuality linked with sexuality. Stimulating worship. Watch the obscenity of some. You don't get that from church worship—not that kind of thing.'

Knowing something about some modern church worship, I wasn't sure.

'So Jezebel really was on for sex?' I said.

Roscoe grinned, 'Just like I said at the beginning, she was sexy and no lady.'

'She was a very clever person—lady or no lady,' I said, 'as calculating as her father who took over Phoenicia. Religion was the way to do it. Ahab fell for her ploy and together they had four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and four hundred of Asherah.'

'It was a takeover,' said Roscoe. 'A kind of sex-worship that was all bright, musical, sensual and sexual. Orgies in fact.'

'Made temple worship look dull,' I said.

'She won the nation,' he said. 'That's how she did it.'

'Until the lone prophet of Israel's God YAHWEH changed things,' I said.

'The battle of the gods,' Roscoe murmured. 'What a man that Elijah was and what a tigress Jezebel. She was quite some enraged and vicious person.'

Roscoe and I went through the story afresh. The lone prophet—this man Elijah—emerged from three and a half years of obscurity. He had claimed there would be only continuing drought and aridity unless Ahab came to his senses and rejected Baal and Asherah. The curious thing is that he could have been marked as prophet of Mot, the Arid One. He prophesied he would cut off the rain. Now suppose he could bring on the rain then they could claim him as a prophet of Baal. It was clear no one thought of him as a prophet of Mot or Baal.

Elijah hated Baal, Anat, Asherah, Ashteroth and the whole box and dice of them. He was dogged in worship of Yahweh and in his love for Him. So much so that when he returned from self-exile he called all the people to the mountain Carmel to see who was the true—that is, the powerful—one of them all. The eight hundred and fifty prophets of the fertility deities—Baal and Asherah—arrived full of confidence. They stacked the timber high on their sacrificial altar. They cut their slain bull into pieces and laid him on the wood. So far, so good.

'Elijah was the fly in the ointment,' said Roscoe. I could see he was building up to a great event. When Roscoe gets excited his breath always quickens and his face goes red and his eyes change colour. He was back on old Carmel.

'Elijah demanded that their gods send fire without them lighting the wood of sacrifice.'

I grinned. 'That Elijah was a bit of a humorist. He was real sarcastic.'

'Come to think of it,' said Roscoe, 'the whole thing was a desperate orgy. There were eight hundred and fifty priest-prophets of the deities, screaming their heads off, chanting like shamans, shouting their mantras and nothing was happening.'

'Elijah was taunting them,' I said. 'He was saying Baal must have been on a walk, or having a sleep, or maybe going off somewhere to relieve himself.'

'Then his turn came,' said Roscoe. 'Elijah's, I mean, and what a turn it was.'

'What do you have when you go from a rock concert?' I asked. 'Especially when it has been hot and heavy and metal-like and sensations have begun to boil as the lava flows from the stage?'

'For a time you seem to have something,' said Roscoe, 'but afterwards emptiness.'

'Emptiness on Carmel,' I said. 'The crowds were seeing through the scam, knowing they had been conned for decades, and all this in spite of the orgies.'

'They were real orgies, the prophets cutting themselves, the blood flowing from their bodies. Dervishes could not have outdone them. They were mad with religion and crazed with screaming for the fire. They had no fire, no holy fire.'

'That Elijah seemed plumb crazy,' Roscoe said, 'asking for barrels of water to be poured over his

sacrifice and Yahweh's altar. Mot would never have done that, or Baal or Asherah.'

'Twelve barrels in all, ' I said. 'And what a soaked sacrifice and altar!'

'No wonder people today call it a myth,' Roscoe said.

'It was brilliant,' I said. 'Nothing else could have defeated the lady from Phoenicea.'

The fire came to Carmel, to Yahweh's sacrifice. Some say it was a supernatural holocaust, and some say it was like an atomic explosion. Archaeologists say you can see the marks on Carmel even today. Be that as it may, the God who answered by fire was the authentic one. The people saw the evidence, and fell on their faces crying, 'Yahweh, He is God; Yahweh, He is the Lord.'

Elijah was quick. 'Seize these false prophets,' he cried. 'Destroy them.'

The people knew why. They did not hesitate. It is said that Elijah himself killed many of them.

'And that,' said my historian friend, 'was not the end of it.'

We were silent together thinking about Jezebel's anger, since 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'. We remembered her threat to Elijah, and he, poor, exhausted man, fled into the wilderness and wanted to die. As one man he had stood for Yahweh and defeated eight hundred and fifty prophets, and Ahab and Jezebel into the bargain. To fill out the score, he had run eighteen miles, just ahead of the speeding chariot of Ahab. Ahab had known what it would do to his kingdom with the gods made foolish and their orgies in the high

mountain shrines made to look as empty promises of true emotional fulfilment. They would be seen for what they were—'fixes' and not fulfilment. Ahab worried all those eighteen miles.

Not so, Jezebel. She was an astute and cunning lady—or woman or bitch or whatever you wish to call her. Her god-addiction, her worship-obsession and her shrewd politics went hand in hand. She needed her fixes as much as any drug addict, so that she was never satisfied. What would satiate her if not the Asherah? If dour old Yahweh had won the day, then everything was gone! So she must save the cult and win back the nation. What she did not know was that Yahweh was reviving his prophet on the ancient mountain of Sinai—the original mountain where Yahweh had made covenant with his people. There had been great fire and rumblings at that time. Yet it was not in the dreadful shaking of all things in an earthquake, nor even in the raging of a holy fire—both of which he showed the prophet—but it was in the deeply moving words of 'a still small voice' ('the sound of a gentle quietness'; 'a gentle silence') that he showed himself. Yahweh's silence, with its words, soaked into the tired, old man.

'How he must have been stunned and awed and in wonderment,' said the unusually poetic Roscoe.

'But the words spoke the death knell to Jezebel,' I said.

Roscoe nodded. 'It finally brought the day when she painted herself to win Jehu.

'Before that she tried to shred Israel's ancient laws. She had the vintner Naboth killed because he would not give Ahab the perpetual inheritance of his land,

home and vineyard. In her religious fervour and her political arrogance she sought to outwit Yahweh. Also she kept Ahab in her grip and raised sons to be princes and despots.

'When she looked out of the window she saw Jehu coming and she sensed the danger.

'So she painted herself, adorned her hair, made herself as beautiful as possible so she could win him.'

'They do this today in thousands upon thousands of beauty parlours,' I said. 'You must be a cynic, Roscoe. She was being a queen, a true queen, daughter of the priest-king of Tyre and Sidon. She was using her brilliance.

'Jehu was a man's man and his God's man,' I said. 'He met the kings of the southern and northern kingdoms at the vineyard of Naboth, the scene of Jezebel's crime in the days of Ahab. It was her son Joram whom she had greatly influenced and now, as king, he saluted the dreaded Jehu. His salutation was "Is it peace?"

'Jehu's reply was brittle, "What peace can there be, so long as the harlotries and the sorceries of your mother Jezebel are so many?"

'The old queen-mother still ruled with the cults she had brought from her heathen land,' I said. 'Jehu was fulfilling the words God had spoken in "the still small voice". Elijah had told Ahab, "In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood."'

The blood of Ahab was to be that of his son Joram, and that of his wife Jezebel and later his own seventy sons whom the queen had trained in her 'harlotries and sorceries'.

'For all her painting and all her adorning of hair,' I said, 'she was not trying to seduce Jehu. She was now an old woman and Jehu was a strong, young warrior. No: she was trying to overwhelm him with her royalty and her personal power. Painted as a royal, strong and arrogant as ever, she cried down from the window to Jehu, "Is it peace, you Zimri, murderer of your master?"

'You remember, Roscoe, that some of the royal eunuchs were also looking down from the window. At the command of Jehu they threw her down from the upper room, her blood spattering on the wall, and also on to the horses who reared in agitation and trampled her to death.'

'It was a strange retribution,' said Roscoe thoughtfully. 'Maybe eight hundred and fifty prophets were no great loss to her. Her personality, shrewdness and wisdom seemed to win her the day. She was political, she was devious and she was strong. Her blood would flow through the seventy sons of Ahab, and capture the land for ever for Baal and Asherah. She had it all made, it seemed, even in her death.'

'And there was Jehu in the palace eating and drinking because he had fulfilled Elijah's prophecy, and Jezebel was destroyed. Jehu, you remember, was prepared to give her burial, but little was left of her when the dogs had finished their work. Her skull, and palms and feet were the only things that re-mained.'

'They were hard in those days,' I said. 'It was pretty gruesome.'

No man is just a theologian, nor just a professor in a college. Unless he is blind he sees the cruelty in every age. Roscoe was no exception.

'She destroyed much,' he said simply, 'and Jehu knew her dastardly works. That was why he said, "This is the word of the Lord which he spoke to his servant Elijah, 'In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung upon the face of the field in the territory of Jezreel; so that no one can say, This is Jezebel.'"

We thought of the endless wars of humanity, and the dreadful atrocities that happen in every massacre, and how massacres are many: men go blood crazy; hell boils out of them. We were a long way from my mild thesis that Jezebel was 'quite a lady'.

'You can understand,' Roscoe said, 'why the feminists hate the word "lady" '.

I could not but agree. 'The only point that I was trying to make was that she was not just a simpering, sexy, promiscuous being, but a brilliant woman whose planning and shrewdness deeply affected a whole nation and effected apostasy.'

He looked at me, and then rolled his eyes upwards. 'Oh, Jezebel!' he said, thinking of the negro spiritual.

We both remained silent for some time thinking of the power of women for both good and evil. We had always known the dreadful power of men for the same things.

After a time I said gently, 'And then there was Elijah!'

'Ah, yes, Hermann,' Roscoe said. 'There was certainly Elijah, a great human being, weak as us, and strong as Yahweh wanted him to be. He had the seventy sons of Ahab put to death. He tried to stop the rot.'

I kept thinking, 'Yes, that was it, but then the rot is still with us.'

I don't know what Roscoe was thinking, but his eyes were sad. Roscoe's eyes can often be very sad.

The Bizarre Bird and the Determined Dog

WHEN you say, 'You'll never believe it!' what you mean is, 'This is so unbelievable that I don't expect you to believe it, but then I believe it because it actually happened!' I guess it is also a way of getting people in so they will listen to you, or read your story—or whatever.

My wife Lisa has a passion for dogs: so do the children, Tony, Lissia and Meralda. If ever—of all the dogs we have had—they have loved one in a special way it has been Rusty our beautiful German Shepherd. Big, mainly black, strong and gentle, he was of course once only a pup and never was pup more cuddled, more affectionate in its returns, and more trained in obedience. He grew to be the ideal young dog, and, when fully grown, to be the kind who would have won every show if we had been in that class of people who show off their prize animals.

We just loved Rusty. Of course, there was not much colour of rust about him, he being pure-bred, but it was a name, anyway, and seemed to fit him. He answered very well to it. You notice I am using the past tense because I am writing this out of a kind of mourning for our lost pet and friend. A whole day has gone, and we have had neither sight nor sound

of our beloved hound. He has never been away from us even for hours.

So we are sad, we are mourning, we are sentimentalising. Lisa, my wife, and Lissia and Meralda, my daughters, are having fits of tears and even of weeping. Tony and I have never gone in for that sort of thing, so we are just keeping ourselves back from the glooms, but showing some sympathy to the three females, but not enough to start them off into wailing episodes. Apart from Rusty's demise they have always shown themselves to be strong-minded members of their gender.

Tony keeps saying, 'He must have been killed in an accident. No way could anyone entice him, and get him to their home.'

'No way,' I keep agreeing solemnly. This sort of thing comforts the females, but then the tears start afresh.

'Maybe a bitch is on heat,' I said once, and the looks I got made me hesitate to pursue that line of thinking.

'It's got to be an accident,' Tony keeps insisting.

Of course we have rung both veterinary clinics. We have asked the police to put out an APP, as though he were a lost person, and because we have friends in the Force, they have done that. The Gas people are also looking. Likewise the CFS fellows who are out looking at grass fires and bush fires. They do not miss much.

In fact everyone is looking for Rusty. If he were in our town which is a harbour one and looks across the ocean out of its magnificent setting, then someone would have seen Rusty. Rusty once became famous because he bailed up a burglar in our nice bungalow, and would not let him go until we

arrived home. The intruder had been kind of burglarised himself. He was trembling with shock, and because he had an over-sized imagination had fancied himself in shreds from Rusty's bared fangs and ferocious salivating looks. Each time the offender peeped out from the bathroom Rusty had been there with his savage snarl.

I think the magistrate had been a bit sorry for the burglar because he let him off with three months' community service, and appointed it to be served on the other side of town. I only tell you all this to let you know that everyone knew Rusty. If he had disappeared it was because someone had run over him or shot him. We knew nobody would shoot him because he never went on the farms or sheep stations, and, as everyone who has a German Shepherd knows, they are not really wolves in disguise or dingoes in black or grey coats. It just had to be one of those road trains, those great freight semitrailers; in this case driven by someone filled with amphetamines or whatever they use to keep themselves going.

It was Lissia who said, 'He might be after that bird down at Anglers' Beach.'

When she said it, you felt the horror come over the whole family. We are all pretty warm-blooded and full of fun and laughter but we froze as cold as is possible for five people to do within one second.

I was inclined to pass it off. I am pretty good at speaking casually when something big is on, casual as though nothing is really important.

'He's never been there without us,' I said. 'We always go together.'

That did not seem to break the silence. I challenged them. 'Did you ever see Rusty go off anywhere without the family?'

It was a proper question, but no one responded by agreeing.

Lissia is a powerful little miss. Everyone seems to think that every word she says is gospel-truth. She has an instinct for what is so.

'He had just been sitting here for days,' she said, 'brooding over *that bird*.'

No one asked, 'What bird?' We all knew *that bird*. Yet I have to say that although we knew the bird, we did not know what kind of bird it was. It was just a bird, but then, not just *any* bird.

You have to say it was an unusual bird. We are bits of bird lovers and we certainly do bird watching. So always had Rusty. He would sit, rump down, tail slowly waving, but eyes unmoving, looking at the bird we would be watching. He knew that if he moved we might miss taking the photograph. So he would watch as though his life depended on it, which, in a mild way, was the case. I am just crazy about watching and photographing birds.

Which was why I was amazed, that Saturday morning when this strange bird fluttered out of the grass and scrub along Anglers' Beach. It was heavy as a mutton-bird, long-necked as a cormorant, and yet could run on the sand as lightly and as quickly as a seagull. Its colour was made up of black, white and grey, whilst its beak was yellow, and definitely the beak of a marine bird.

I am telling you what happened that day, but at the same time I am mindful of my family here, all

played out in fear lest what happened that Saturday has happened for the second and last time.

You see, the problem went something like this. The strange, unnamed creature was flapping about the sand like a crazed mutton-bird. None of us wanted to rush him—or her. We just loved birds. Dogs, as you know, love to play games with birds, and really rough games, so it was a bit crazy of this feathered animal to splither and spluther across the sand, which it was doing.

Rusty rushed it. His happy jaws almost snapped on its tail, but suddenly it rose as graceful as a pelican taking off, and made about six feet ahead of our dog. Then it seemed helpless again. That set Rusty off with joyful bounds and rising hopes.

Suddenly suspicion hit me. This member of an unknown species was playing games with our intelligent German Shepherd. It was matching wits for wits. I knew *why*. Up there in the salty seashore grasses and stunted scrub it had its nest, or maybe a little to the left where the mangroves edged on to the sand. It was taking Rusty and us away from its nest. I had seen birds do this a hundred times. Sometimes it was just a frail little thing that you wanted to catch and hold in your hands when you were a loving, interested child. Maybe you had something of the bird-and-animal lover in you, wanting to help.

A mate and I woke up to this lurk, and one would follow the bird whilst the other searched for the nest and often we found it. The bird which made out it had a broken wing or an injured leg would come flying back as whole as ever and dash at us, trying to pick out our eyes. We would laugh because we had no bad intentions for its nest, and we loved the fun.

Rusty loved that fun, not knowing what the fun was. The day he followed the unknown species of sea-bird, it lured him to the water. That didn't worry us much because Rusty was a great swimmer. So we let him dog-paddle after the foolish imitation of a mutton-bird and other species.

The bird floundered in the water as though it could not swim nor lift itself to fly. Rusty was sure he had it. All the time we had not clapped our hands nor shouted to egg him on. Now we were caught up in the chase. For love of him, we wanted him to catch the bird, but for thought of the bird we wished he couldn't. It almost looked as though he had succeeded. He swam furiously, strongly and silently, and the bird looked as though it was drowning.

Just as his strong jaws snapped, the bird rose into the sky and flew gracefully. As I said, as graceful as a lumbering pelican once it gets into the air. Like the old flying boats of the war days.

This time it flew a hundred yards further out to sea. It scooped up a fish in its flight and landed on a high rock like a shag, gulping at the fish and keeping its eye on Rusty. It seemed to be mocking him.

German Shepherds are quite playful, but when it comes to a contest they are also determined creatures, and a bit proud into the bargain. Rusty altered course towards the shaggy rock. Having gulped the fish, the bird seemed to go to sleep. He nestled into himself like a seagull when it is settling down for a rest. He had no eye for Rusty.

Rusty swam on, silently determined to win his game. He reached the rock and pawed upwards. He gained ground, or rather, rock. He slithered upwards silently until he was within snapping distance of the bird. Just as he was about to make the leap, it slipped

into the air, spread its wings and flew further out to sea. Now there was no pretence of being foolish, zonked, crass or crazy. It was pure bird, every inch and feather of it. It flew on into the far reaches of the ocean as though migrating from Australia.

That was when we became alarmed. Rusty was out at least a mile and he was swimming to where the bird was migrating. Pretty soon he would be gone beyond us.

Tony has a thin, shrill whistle. Never once has it failed to recall Rusty.

'I'll whistle him,' said Tony.

We were all glad. I can whistle sheepdogs, but my whistle never acts for Rusty like Tony's.

Sound carries well on water, but Rusty did not seem to hear it. If he looked back then we were too far away to see it. He was almost lost to us, a small, dark blob making for the nearest country which was probably hundreds or thousands of miles away.

Lisa said to me, 'Sandy, you'd better get the boat. You'd better go after him or he'll die. He'll drown from exhaustion.'

Tony and I raced up the beach to the pier. It didn't take us long to get the motor into life. We swung the power boat away into the surf and then beyond it and we were after Rusty.

We caught him up, of course. He had a strange set look in his eyes as though one drugged or maybe possessed by a special dream. His eyes were on the pilot bird which was guiding him into some new world. Our dog seemed to have stopped being ours. He had a dream, a vision, a goal, and he was making for it. All the family ties seemed to have been cut. He was, though he were not, our Rusty.

'Rusty,' I cried gently. 'Rusty old boy.'

He didn't respond to that. Tony put up two fingers to his bared teeth and let out the ripper of a whistle.

That did it. Rusty seemed to have come out of a fixed trance. He turned and saw us. His eyes lit up. He tried to show his joy.

We were vastly relieved as we hauled him into the boat, not even minding him shaking himself all over us. Tony hugged him and the great hound of a German Shepherd sat back on his haunches, looked into the sky and loved every minute of it. I thought he was going to howl for joy and mystery.

He was given the love-treatment when he reached the beach. The girls were all over him, and he over all the girls. It was a grand reunion.

Only once did he look out to sea and, as there was no bird in sight, turned his attention to us again.

We went home in relief, Rusty bounding ahead of us as though there had been an adventure, and certainly no peril.

Now as we sat there, at home, mourning all about Rusty, it had been Lissia who had said, 'He might be after that bird down at Anglers' Beach.'

That was when we had all gone stone-cold. We were thinking the bird had come back and was luring Rusty to his death. Maybe Rusty was out there in the Pacific or the Indian Ocean going his hardest, but getting weaker and weaker, whilst the strange bird was luring him to his death and doom, and laughing out of its feathered self like some triumphant demon. None of us slept well that night.

When we woke as though out of a nightmare we slipped out of the house to see whether Rusty had returned in the night.

He had not returned. Somewhere out in the ocean he was still swimming or he wasn't swimming at all. In our heart of hearts we knew this to be untrue. He was just canine mincemeat, stuck to the multifarious tyres of a road train. Or maybe some dog thief had given him drugged meat and now he was sleeping it off in a city home, or the new owners were grooming him for a famous dog show where he would win all the prizes. All this speculation was getting us nowhere, but it was something to go on with even if we could prove nothing.

It was midnight when the knocking came at the door. It was 'Jamesie' as we called him, in other words Brad James of *The Hauler*, one of the best tuna boats of the Fishing Corporation in our harbour. He looked tired, and although I had known him to do other things at midnight, he had never knocked us up at this particular hour.

With him was Allan McCoy his first mate on the vessel. He looked tired also.

'We been listening to your talk on the local radio about your dog Rusty. We felt real sorry, we did. Rusty is a great German Shepherd. Nothing quite like him.'

By this time Lisa and the three children were clustered around me. Tony was standing off, as males do, listening.

'A great dog,' I said, and my voice sounded like a growl, maybe because I was tired.

'Dogs are strange things,' Brad said. He had pushed back his cap and was scratching his head. His first mate was nodding hard.

Lisa said, 'Come inside and we'll get you coffee.'

The two men looked gratified. 'Could do with coffee.' they said together. 'You need something like that after strange experiences.'

I stared at them. I knew fishermen tell you about strange things. I have seen strange things myself.

'What strange things this time?' I asked.

They would say nothing until Lisa set the steaming mugs in front of them. She makes good gingerbread, and they took large hunks.

The children were silent. Midnight is not their best time, especially when they have been awakened.

'It was this thing we saw paddling in front of us, right there in the late afternoon. We thought maybe it was a dolphin imitating something it had learned. Then we knew it was no dolphin.'

'No dolphin?' asked Lissia wonderingly. Even so, she yawned.

Tony stared hard. 'I guess it was a dog,' he said.

Jamesie nodded slowly. 'A dog,' he said, 'but you never seen a dog like this one.'

'No!' I said. My heart was pumping. 'What was different about this dog?'

Jamesie chewed at his gingerbread, and swallowed. 'It was like it was setting itself to swim the Channel, or was doing a special swimming marathon. Maybe it was trying to swim back to Germany.'

'A German Shepherd!' Meralda shouted.

Jamesie nodded. He winked at Allan McCoy.

'Big beggar,' he said, 'and real powerful. I reckon he'd a made it to Melbourne if not Sydney, or maybe to Auckland.'

'Rusty!' shouted Lissia.

I was still looking at Jamesie. I noticed there were tears in Lisa's eyes, and I think we were all trembling a bit.

'It was just that look,' said Jamesie. 'Five miles out from the Harbour and kind of going nowhere.'

Tony said quietly, 'Was there a bird, a seabird like a cross between a mutton-bird, a cormorant and a shag, and did it fly like it was a bit helpless?'

Jamesie shook his head. 'No bird,' he said. 'Just a dog.'

'Rusty!' screamed Lissia.

The two men nodded. 'Took us a time to get a dinghy down and get him to give up his swim. Looked at us as though he didn't know what we were.'

There was some silly laughter in us all, but we dared not let it out. We dared not, for fear tears would come. Our family had always been tough.

I had a sudden fear. 'Is Rusty still alive?' I asked. I thought it might have been too much for him.

Jamesie gave the nod to McCoy and Allan went out. I knew they had a panel van. I knew I had better go with McCoy.

'He's dead tired,' the first mate said. 'He's been hours in the sea. Maybe a couple of days, like. Lucky it's summer or he'd have had it with hypothermia.'

Allan opened the back doors of the panel van. There was no noise in the vehicle. Allan switched on a torch. Two beautiful, brown eyes like pools of paradise looked upward, but the animal still lay, head on paws, just staring. The whole thing seemed uncanny. Was he really a dog or did dogs have ideas we never have even dreamed about, much less understood?

I said, 'Good old Rusty Boy.'

He heard that. He stirred. He wasn't gazing any more. With a cry and a whimper and growl all rolled into one, he made for me, nearly knocking me down.

He was licking me all over, and I was trying to be tough in the face of McCoy's presence.

Our street is pretty quiet at night. Rarely the hoods have invaded it, but I heard a high, shrill whistle and Rusty nearly knocked me down for the second time. He bounded towards the house and there was Tony at the door outlined by the light behind him. Lisa and the girls were crowding around Rusty and he was pawing and licking, and jumping up and bounding around.

I stayed back with Allan McCoy. We watched Rusty and the family having fun, just after midnight.

'Real uncanny,' Allan was saying. 'Like he was a man or more than a man. I'll never forget that look.'

I was going to tell our story about the strange sea-bird we had never seen until that morning on Anglers' Beach. It wasn't just that I was tired because of the hour, or even because of the elation. It was because the whole thing seemed to open revelations of the bird and animal kingdom. Even all that affection going on between my family and Rusty with tough old Jamesie in the background drinking his coffee and grinning had me in.

In a way I was mad about the whole event. Not just because it was such a demand of emotion-power, but because I knew I wasn't going to sleep for the rest of the night. The strange seabird would float in and out of my mind, and its weird attraction for Rusty would puzzle me, and I would try to work out what had got into the dog's mind. All the time I would be thinking about how humans can love dogs and dogs love them, and the whole universe would seem quite strange because birds and animals go outside the grid we have for them.

After the two men from the trawler were gone, Rusty had gone to his doghouse and the children to bed, I sat with Lisa. We know each other's minds and so we sat, drinking coffee and saying nothing.

After a time she said, 'Even if we don't go to sleep, let's just go to bed.'

It was then I knew she knew the mystery the same as I did. The only difference between her and me was that it was a riddle for me to puzzle out, but for her it was a mystery to live in. A wonderful mystery, for that matter, and much better than a supposed puzzle.

Beyond Culture

FOR A moment Denny had the illusion that the huge man had driven his Mercedes Benz into the living room where they were having their meal. They—the family—had casually asked him to lunch, but the father had not been there. They were, all of them, originally from Hong Kong, but long ago had turned themselves into Australians doing things the way others did them. He had known, of course, that taking on a new land and a different culture never really changed much within the minds of the persons and the family. They brought their culture with them, and, for the most part, retained it. And why not? Thousands of years do not dissolve in the short period of a lifetime.

He was at ease with them, the mother who was warm and benign and truly maternal—matronly; the daughter who was very much the Uni student and fascinated by her philology. The boys, of course, were all doing medicine: doing medicine was part of the culture.

Their talk had not been desultory. They were thinkers, all of them, though scarcely creative. They loved the interchange, but there was no mystery. Perhaps their culture had been drained of much of that. Genuinely believing themselves to be truly Australian, they still held the fascination for him that they were of another culture, and he likewise held the fascination for them of opening up

elements that they had not yet known or depthed. So they had been talking about philology, about the principles of language, the discipline of linguistics, agreeing that you keep discovering the past by words, and that words are the key to the culture, and that the mysterious origins of humanity lie way back of the words, the customs and the strange laws that have long captured the wills of the tribe and race.

He was watching each of them in his quiet quest for more knowledge, and they were knowing and responding. That was when the large bulk of the man lumbered across the room. It seemed to him that this father of the children and husband of the wife had driven his shiny car into the living room, but of course that was a momentary illusion, a dreamy observation that was only partly true. He knew the man loved his status car more, even, than its status. He genuinely liked being wrapped about by this fine piece of machinery. It was part of him.

Denny's illusion was that the car had stopped short of the meal table and the man had lumbered out of it. The head of the house had not expected to see this older man chatting away with his family. Somehow the family must greet him without a stranger being present. They must show their joy—and respect—at his arrival. In fact, he had left the car on the red gravel drive outside, and had shouldered his way into the house and to the dining table. He had a first quick look at his daughter who was showing too much flesh—the fruits of modernity which offended him. A quick look at his wife to see whether she still admired and revered him, and then almost a smile as he let his eyes rest upon his pride of life, the three young sons who were doing well as medical students.

He was a doctor himself, though more in the matter of making money than living in the code of being a medico. Even so, he was a good doctor, leading a famous and highly profitable medical clinic. Yet he needed to come home and nestle back into the heart of the family. It was not that he resented their visitor for he respected older men. It was just that it always took time before he could melt from his clinical mode into the fresh social situation. Denny understood all of this. Almost eight decades of human living had helped him to understand that, even beyond culture, human beings had their humanity in common. Even culture was ultimately defeated in this reality.

So the bulky man nodded and smiled, making him-self to be warm and not resentful of the guest, and taking up the conversation at the point of hearing.

'Multi-culturalism is fascinating,' he was saying as he tucked his serviette across his vast front. 'There is no end of new understandings and customs and things that make sense when you comprehend them.'

The music of conversation swirled around Denny. He always let it flow like the sea, and rarely tried to combat the surf of such an ocean. He liked the breakers that crashed: they were the ideas new to him that came suddenly, and which he allowed to become his, stored away in his prodigious mind. One day they would flow out in a story, an article, a lecture or even in a chance conversation. He loved to share his riches with others, knowing nothing had ever come into being, bidden by him. It was the unbidden which was so stimulating.

While they were talking, he was thinking of the shift. It had been from the Hills of the metropolitan

area down to the plains of the same. He and his wife had loved their years in the big house. They had loved seeing stringy-bark bush turn into a gracious landscape of lawns and paths, of trees greener than the stringies and softer in the effected landscape. They had both had eighteen years of more grandchildren being born, of their visits to the family house, gallivantings around the sloping lawns, cricketing on the small playing area, water slides on the green plastic, and having freedom to filch strawberries from the perennial patch. There had been slidings down the stairs and two replacements of carpet in that area.

There had been many other things: a trickle of visitors which often swelled to a stream, people coming with troubles. Others coming because they liked to drink at his or her fountains and to lap up the things that accumulate and are called 'wisdom'. Wisdom he liked almost above all things, but then wisdom was no thing. It was the way God, human beings, creation and culture all just happened to be.

So when he had to pack up his immense library, and his wife Edna had to put her things of kitchen and craft into cardboard cartons, he had been surprised by the amount of their accumulations. Something in him had been a trifle ashamed. He had always thought of himself as uncluttered but now he saw that a nest had developed. It was like a ship that had gathered barnacles, so they both put their vessel into dry dock and banished the barnacles. The service organisations that helped the poor and needy eagerly divested them of their surplus. Sometimes the children or their children would look with dismay.

'Dad, can I have that? Grandpa, don't give that to the Goodwill people. It would look good in my

study.' 'Grandma, you are not giving *that* away!' Reproach and voiced desire. He had been surprised, too, at the bit of resentment that was around the family. Grandparents lived forever in their family home. It was their duty never to go on to the plains. Here—as grandparents—they were abandoning the one safe centre of life, and daring to go off to a smaller house where grandchildren—and maybe great-grandchildren—could never ramble, wander, gallivant, shout, scream and delight in the security of an older generation with all its knowledge and good things. All families, they thought, should have a central home.

He had discovered pain—pain he had never thought he could have. It was not passion for the old house or even the hurt of dispossession. It was just that there had been roots there all the time, going down, clutching at the soil, hidden, resolving never to be uprooted. That had surprised him because he prided himself on being possessed by nothing. He had always walked by the rule that fame should never be the spur, nor that he should ever be owned by owning.

Whilst he ruminated, the excited babble of voices went on around him. Ideas came to this family by flashes and spurts and they were, so to speak, the life blood of an acquisitive culture. As he let it all flow over him, he was looking out through the great glass sheets of windows across the hills where a new suburb had sprung up, called by the amused, 'Hong Kong Hill'. The largeness of the houses never ceased to amaze him. Some of them looked like castles, citadels against the shame of non-success. Others were unashamedly displaying the immensity of

wealth, or, perhaps, of mortgages. He did not know. It was just that such gave pleasure to him. Years ago these dwellings would have aroused anger in him. He would have seen vulgarity in them, but the best architects had designed them and their immensity and the landscaped beauty about them disarmed you. It was a dream world, and he let them have their dreams. Dreams were so temporal, ephemeral. Why, just now he had dreamed the bulky medico had driven his shining limo into the room, stopping abruptly at the table. He had even imagined the clinician was going to run him—Denny—down because he wanted the family to himself and Denny had invaded at the precious mealtime.

As he let his gaze wander across the marvellous and expensive hillscape, he thought of their own new, but smaller, home. He had always disliked—even dreaded—being a suburban dweller, encased in a suburban home, but now he lived in delighted surprise. He did not mind neighbours next to him on three sides, with his own home fronting a suburban street. The deep, inner pain that had grown in the last days on the Hills to be a chronic ache, had dissolved in the laughter as close friends and some of his family had helped them to settle in. Cartons were opened by the women and girls and the amazing bulk of contents stored away in cupboards or displayed as pictures, medallions, trinkets and souvenirs. The men hung the pictures, his grandson arranged his books perfectly on their new maple shelves, and his own desks and electronic equipment properly set out gave him confidence that he could resume his reading, his writing and his thinking. His bulky leather Jason was there to help him in all that, especially in the times of contemplation.

In the evening of the move, they ate curry and rice—their favourite dish—supplied by a loving daughter. Her little family lingered only long enough to see the old couple settled in and they left with nodding, backward looks. He and Edna had looked at each other with the gazing that tells everything: the philology of love, you might say. Years of semi-institutional living had now given way to a quietness and the contentment of having time to themselves.

He looked at this present busy family on this 'Hong Kong Hill' ensconced in its spacious mansion, making its way towards some planned goal, some proof of its ability, some assurance of its success, and he sighed. He knew none of these things mattered except as you made them matter, but beyond such mattering they could not matter. He thought of Wordsworth and one of his best statements, 'Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.' He looked down at the magnificent homes, some of which covered hectares, and he shook his head gently. They were illusions, albeit delightful illusions, but he knew the things that would be going on inside them and in the social and commercial world their inhabitants knew, a world he had never coveted. He shook his head to himself.

Daughter Susan was going on about the wonders of philology. 'You get a window into culture,' she said. 'You go back to marvels of our origins. You pick up wisdom. You learn new things. You get insights.'

Her father's pride was apparent. He liked his daughter to be so intelligent, but back of his mind was the clinic, and the growth of his investments, and the new things he delighted to buy. He was

planning houses for his children, and further status for the grandchildren who would come, and pondering the life from which he had come in rural Malaysia. An ancient dynasty, but an impoverished one, and there all had changed. He could not help the joy that was coming to him, and the pride that was welling up. He glanced fondly at his wife and was grateful for how she had helped him. His gaze rested upon his sons, and he knew his cup to be full.

He was not sure he liked the old man who listened with a silent smile and seemed unimpressed by the things which surely were assessed and admired by his friends and his enemies. What he did not know was that a similar vein of thought was in the mind of his family's guest. That one was thinking how simple life could be when uncluttered by ambition and possessions, wealth and status. When one had none of these encumbrances of ambition, then one could enjoy them, even these sprawling mansions on the city's 'Hong Kong Hill'. Let come, let go, was a sentiment he had lived by.

His mind was on the new house, complete, simply landscaped, unostentatious. He was thinking of the early mornings he was knowing these days when he ate breakfast on the red brick patio, and watched the blackbirds hop in the small back garden, and the honeysuckers pierce the beautiful hibiscus flowers from behind, whilst the doves came fluttering down on the rustic bird feeder, eager for the given grain. Sparrows came too, as though they coveted being cared for, and whilst the doves walked daintily the sparrows hopped to the freebie seed. Quietness and coolness were the two notes of the morning until the lorikeets bustled into the creamy flowers of the tall

eucalypts a block away and the other parrots ravaged the almost ripened almonds.

He must have dreamed the large medico had borne down upon him in a Mercedes. He must have dreamed some of the brilliance Susan the daughter had been sharing with them from her studies. The smiling mother and the nodding sons must also have come out of a dream, yet all these things had seemed substantial.

Now the family was turning to him. They were mutely appealing, but what they wanted he did not quite know. Then it dawned upon him that they were silently confessing their needed wisdom. They had few old people in their midst. Some they had eagerly imported from Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other such places, but his own generation had been here some time. This family now gazing at him knew he had accumulated wisdom. Culture could be a bastion and a barrier, a place for hiding, a cover for barrenness and inner poverty. Culture guaranteed nothing. It had its origins in the dim, primal times and who could, in the ultimate, trust it for security and peace?

He knew that if his wife were here she would give feminine wisdom in short bursts of honesty and commonsense reality, breaking the illusions that are always the children of culture. He, himself, was more for principles of understanding: they brought their own practice, and creative insights came spontaneously. Their eyes were upon him. The bulky, successful doctor was like a child. His eyes were large, moist and gentle. Animosity—if it had been that—had dissolved. His wife was nodding as though good things were about to come. Susan had let her philology fade away and her hands were on her lap.

The sons did not look awkward, neutral or resentful as many young men did in these days. They, too, were desiring to be wise.

He wondered what he would say in this atmosphere which was suddenly gentle and wanting and peaceful. It was the peace of anticipation. He realised then how great a thing is wisdom and how far it outweighs all human knowledge. He also knew that such wisdom comes from above, never from below, never from the recesses of understanding which is just human.

When he began speaking there was no self-consciousness, no pride of knowing, no awareness of achieved maturity or success. It was more like being a child whose mind is not yet cluttered, but he knew it was an art to be like this and not just a chance happening. He was remembering that mystery is not a riddle to be solved but something in which to live.

'The wise person,' he thought, 'is one who does not see the mystery as a puzzle to be worked out, but as a gift from above to be lived in.'

Beyond Religion

I AM A preacher. I, thank God, am beyond religion. I have always disliked religion, but at the same time have always admired faith, even faith that is not seated in the supernatural or the transcendent, which is a way of saying that faith can help people on the horizontal plane of life.

I have come to be very suspicious of religion. Religion seems to grip people deeply, so that they will fight others and even kill others in their loyalty to it. Such as in the time of ancient religions in the hot bowl of age-old religions in the Near East, and I doubt not but that it was the same in the darkness of the early West—wars over the gods, and cruelties inflicted that even now make us shudder. 'Countless thousands mourn man's inhumanity to man.'

In our lifetime there have been the massacre of the Armenians, the tragedy of sectarian bitterness in Northern Ireland, the heart-rending hatred in Lebanon, and now in Bosnia Herzegovina. Head-hunters in jungles have done dreadful things in the names of their spirits. Religion is man using his gods to advance himself, and when the gods do not please him, he sometimes trashes them, but they are reborn in him with new faces and smiling promises. One of the most terrible of the gods is humanism. It spawned a liberty which has turned dire tragedy. It led a whole Western set of nations astray, and today men and women can only have secular gods, lords

drained of the enriching transcendence and the mystery that is needed to satisfy the human spirit in the depths as it points to deity beyond the powers and full comprehension of our humanity.

I stray from the purpose of this story. I am a preacher, but a man not of religion but only of faith. I have seen so much pain in my life that I could despair of the true God. I have been careful not to vandalise Him in my mind, lest I lose what can be the only true object of faith. It is not as though I have only seen evil and human cruelty, and the mercilessness which religion seems to bring to the human scene. I know that many lie silent in their millions of graves, most unmarked, many of them mass graves, silent sentinels of the fearful injustice they have suffered, injustice still unrequited. Their blood cries from the ground. All such blood weeps and cries to the sky for vengeance. I have learned that one can so hate religion that hatred becomes a religion itself, and the drive for justice produces its even more terrible brood of humans who practise bitter injustice that they might have justice in the end: so blind they are. Injustice in the name of seeking justice compounds the terror human beings have come to know and fear.

If, at nights, I have trembled with the evil of fellow human beings, then I have remembered the incredible release many have had on coming to faith, release from the shackles of a tyrannical conscience that had never let them rest in this world, let alone any world that might yet be to come.

A preacher of faith has his sweet moments. I remember once being in what was called 'East Pakistan'. That was some decades ago. There were

people called 'Garos' who were tribal people in the north of the country, many of them on the other side of the border in India. They had somehow heard of me when I was in West Pakistan and called me to talk to them, and I was doing just that. I watched their large, dark eyes in their gentle, brown faces, and somehow knew their minds as they heard my words translated. Some of them knew English, and I would see their eyes light up as they grasped this thought and that. They were intelligent people, wearied of the gods they had known, and wanting genuine faith which was forever beyond religion.

When our meetings finished and I was about to return to West Pakistan, the elders came to me. In their halting English, they told me, 'Sir, when you were filled with wonder at the things you told us, we, too, were filled with wonder. When you laughed, we laughed and oh, we laughed with joy! When you wept, we wept: oh, we wept.'

For me, it was a rare moment, and one of the most triumphant moments of my life was seated in my memory. I often go back to those hours, and that strange warmth I knew spreads itself in my heart. Faith beyond religion is a grand thing.

In Pakistan a Hindu priest sat with his tribe for days in the sun, and, at the last, understanding broke through. No proselytes, these, but people awakening from a long, dark night to warm sunlight. 'Sahib,' he reproached me, 'why did you not come with this message of divine Fatherhood many years ago? We had been locked away from such joy.'

A woman in Thailand sat in her bamboo hut in a field of maize and listened to me through an interpreter. The tears spilled as she came into relief of life. In Japan—the land of my former captors—I saw

weeping which showed the softness of emancipated hearts. I have rarely seen such surprise and astonishment on hearers as they displayed. In all of this there was no religious tirade, no sectarian propaganda—only faith.

Once, in the 'sixties, I was in a large room of red bricks and prison bars. In the days of World War II the building had been a prisoner of war detention cell. Inside the building the red bricks had been blackened by the smoke of innumerable cooking fires. Now it was part of the living quarters of Christians whom Hindus and Moslems both despised because they were of the lowest origins, people of 'the scheduled castes', doomed forever to clean latrines, take away human excreta and dust the homes of the rich. Social religion had shackled them so that they might not escape into their true humanity. They lived in the shambles and shame of a cast-iron system of sociality. Once they had burned with indignity, but centuries had numbed their feelings, driven their anger and hatred down into the depths so that they might not live perpetually with boiling bowels.

When people of faith came to them preaching liberty of the spirit they had learned that curious freedom which almost revels in its social chains that remain but can no longer bind. That day we sat on the floor, our grand carpet being a bit of hessian, a concession of burlap. Young men were with me, playing their ancient instruments of music, whilst freedom spilled through the songs born of their emancipation of spirit. I had come to love their genre, the idiom of heart expression, and I was jealous for their native discovery of love.

Outside, some of the men were washing the one set of clothes they possessed. They stood in their loin cloths in the burning sun, but did not seem to mind. Whilst religion may be the opiate of the people, faith is the stimulation of the spirit. I marvelled at their resilience of spirit. Despised by others, they had freedom from dreary sophistication and the drugs of human success. They were in touch with a world that western human enlightenment thought it had destroyed. That world brought their songs to birth.

The old men whose garments had quickly dried in the heat of the sun sat before me, grey hair and beards as flowing as their shirts and dhotis. They had a kind of grace dignity but when they clapped their hands as they sang they had the elan of youth. The young had no less dignity. Black walls and hessian and bars in the windows—all symbols of social degradation and present poverty—in no way depressed them, if indeed they noticed these things.

After we shared worship and faith one of the elders came up to me and peered into my eyes. 'Sahib,' he said, 'today Jesus Christ walked and talked here.' He smiled. 'It was very beautiful,' he added and walked off. I wondered whether he had been mystical, imaginative, but I knew that however *he* was, and *it* was, faith had pierced the barrier of otherwise dull human living. Religion is of human conception, but faith is not bound by three dimensions and five senses though it is the essence of them.

Not far from that place there had been a proud Brahman whose spirit was tortured in the midst of his religious exercises. He saw one of these outcast sweepers cleaning his outhouses and singing with great joy. He was enraged at the gaiety and freedom

of the man who knew such delight whilst he—the Brahman and so a god to wit—knew no such liberty. He reproached the person of low degree who told him with a surprised lift of the eyebrow, 'O great Sir, I am a simple man of simple faith. I know God and he knows me.' The Brahman listened intently to his message of faith and his old ideas fell away from him and he became a person and preacher of faith. He emulated the simplicity of the sweeper-singer, and travelled for many years in the hot Sindh desert, telling his neighbours of the truth of life. No doctrinaire person was either of these.

My experience of life over almost eight decades has not been simply as a spectator. The watcher sees all, as the famous Danish philosopher once said, as though from a balcony, and he makes his decisions and opinions about humanity and this world. When he leaves the balcony and mingles with those who were formerly to him just passers-by, he is in the world of human reality. If he has even a modicum of human compassion he weeps when they weep, and if he has a smidgen of human delight he laughs when they laugh. He has pity for the comedian and the entertainer, and no less pity for the shallow self-deceit of the clever and sophisticated. His modicum of human compassion, nevertheless, has no answer for human emptiness, 'the aching void this world can never fill'. He becomes a cynic or religious, a humanist or a nihilist. Maybe he becomes an anarchist, if he has anger, and if he drowns his anger it will be in a calculated materialistic way of life. He has many choices. It may come to pass that loss of faith in the seen may bring him to faith in the unseen which alone makes sense of the seen.

You see, as I confessed, I am a preacher, and preachers for the most part are an abomination to other human beings. We have many preachers with many gospels, and many religions, and none is to be trusted whether secularist or supernaturalist. Nor are they trusted generally speaking. Years ago, in my ignorance, I thought one only had to write well or speak well, and the world would come with gratitude to my feet. Now I am ever so glad they did not, and do not. That would have been my undoing and theirs. Propaganda is quickly recognised. Men and women have their security systems, their bastions against invasion by others and they need these to preserve human dignity from clever persuasion and sly, subtle seduction. Politics are vain; ideologies are the concoctions of simplistic but fanatical thinkers; and religions all lead to misery. At first wooing, religions are fascinating, even beautiful, yet none answers the blunt reality of our mortality. After-wards, religions leave us barren of true joy, and of peace of conscience. Guilt continues to adhere. Yet nothing will stop people going to priests and gurus, shamans, pundits and even sorcerers if these people—called ‘hierophants’—can tell them there is more to life than what they see. They will listen to diviners and interpreters of the occult, and try to link up with what is beyond the natural as they know it, but in all this they will, nevertheless, be cautious. Deep down in the human spirit, the will will not allow itself to be deceived.

Part of my story—the life I have lived, and contemplation of many things—tells me the greatest religious hoax of all times is humanism. ‘I did it my way’ is its theme song. ‘I can do all things’ is its

claim. The Age of Reason and Enlightenment debunked faith in all other than human ability, ability to reason all things, ability to accomplish all things—of course, given time. Other religions were sucked in. They wanted a bit of this fascinating cake. They dropped their reliance on the supernatural and opted for the seen and the obvious. They rationalised the powers within the human race. Before long, they cannibalised themselves. The measure of all things being Man, humanism has determined the perimeters of human living. Now its altars are cracking, its festival flowers wilting, its former adherents—many of them—looking for some object of faith. Brilliant as Man is, his dimensions have to exceed the ones he knows, and to which he is limited. What object of faith will satisfy human questing without letting it off moral responsibility and accountability?

Whether you can believe it or not, this bit of writing is a story, though it is not a fiction. The story that avoids the mystery or concocts a false mystery is no story. I keep living in the story and I keep meeting other people in the story. For example, as a boy in my teens during the years of the Great Depression, I was canvassing trade for a dry cleaner, and I met a man who was an artist. He lived in a room built in the garden at the back of a house. I think his parents put him there because they could not bear him in the house. I think—in recollection—that he painted well. He wanted me to look at his paintings, and I did this, but I noticed he was trembling to the point of shaking. Suddenly, I knew him to be homosexual and wanting something of my soft youthfulness to feed him. I was intelligent enough to escape him, but in later years I realised that all perversion is a

yearning for love whilst at the same time being a rejection of its demands. Later yet, I met a missionary who was religious during the day, but at night sought to prey on youths like myself. Horrified, I reported him, and I suppose that was what I should have done, but now I realise that religion was his substitute for faith, and that as yet he had not come to faith: he had only thought he had. I have one dogma, that to come to faith is to come to love, but then to love which is beyond human origin, though not beyond human practice.

I am a storyteller and I have hundreds—if not thousands—of stories to tell, but I know there are boundaries beyond which editors and publishers will not let me go. Not only must they protect their readers from religionists but they must see all people of faith as religionists. If religions are whacky, or cultic like the Jones case in Guyana and the Karesh case in Waco, Texas, then they will make news, but they will not bring acceptance. Of course, all religionists call themselves people of faith, and this story will itself be suspect as being a ploy to grasp the reader and imprison him—or her—within religion.

What then, should I do, may I do, ought I to do? I ought to persist in telling the stories that alone can bring a revelation of humanity in its secularism, its religions and in its faith. All artists are preachers, whether they paint, write, compose, sing or seek to entertain. All are storytellers and the test of their artistry is whether they bring relief, release, peace and joy to the human spirit. Sometimes they have to debunk the minds of their hearers or viewers. If they can etch the pain and sorrow of the human race then they must also be inspirers of joy and merriment, peace and purity. They must colour cultures with the

assurance that transcends the mean and the miserable, the mediocre and the midget minds, as well as the false brilliance that deceives the gullible.

It will just have to be one hell—or heaven—of a good story that will open the ties that bind and let men and women go free. Which—at the last—reminds me of a story I once lived in. It went something like this.

It was at the end of World War II and the location was Kranji Prison Camp on Singapore Island. Lord Mountbatten and his wife came into our prison camp. He jumped up on a mess table, and, greeting us, introduced his 'Missus' as he called her. That Lady smiled sweetly and with pity and compassion. Mountbatten then said, 'Fellows, you are free to go out. We have taken away the Japanese guards, and there are Ghurkhas there to see nothing happens to you. The gates are open, so now, out you go!'

Most of the prisoners just stared at him. Many of them were just skin and bones, eyes receded into their sockets, hair the fine fluff of the state of malnutrition. Some shook their heads vaguely. Others had gleams and glimmers of understanding. Few walked through the gates. Most of us who did were men of faith. Just that. It was a story which tells a story. Religion is a prop that fails in the crucial hour. Faith shines brightest at that point.

It is good to be beyond religion, but then better to be in faith.

Sweet Cob

THERE was something curiously familiar about the woman who was preceding him up the stairs of the Wahroonga Railway Station on Sydney's North Shore Line. She had sat parallel with him in the electric train, but on the other side of the aisle, and he had admired her fine lines, and the mounting excitement he sensed in her as they had travelled north to this particular suburb. For him, it was a sentimental journey, one taken after many decades, a return to his boyhood place of living. For her? Well, he did not know. He knew she was probably about his own age, now into her seventies.

For a moment he was startled, not by her but by the clump of palms rearing their smooth boles into the heavens, a great tassel of leaves on each head and—he thought—with shining clusters of dates hanging down from their great height. Years ago he had known those palms as short and lithe as young girls, and that was why he was startled to come upon them. Rather, they had come upon him. And, it seemed, they had come upon her also. She had paused, gripping the iron rail, staring up at them.

It gave him time to catch up with her. These days he did not find climbing to be easy. As he drew level with her, he saw that she was entranced with the palms. Naturally shy, he ventured to talk with her.

'Quite a feature, aren't they?' he said. When she did not answer, he added, 'I remember them when

they were very young. Quite short they were but with larger heads.'

She said, musingly, 'The heads are the same size. It is just that they are taller. Quite gone into the sky, aren't they?'

He thought he knew the voice. It came out of the past to tease him. Yet he could not recall the person. Some line of excitement was chasing through him, telling him that he was to come upon unusual joy.

When she stayed, still staring at the palms, he climbed ahead of her. He did not want to leave her, but to stay would have been beyond his shyness. When he reached the platform at the top, he paused and looked across at the shops, and memory came flooding in. It was almost too much to take, this uprush of the old days. On this very platform, he had stared, afternoon by afternoon, at the Abbotsleigh College girls, fascinated by so much young feminine beauty and yet too awkward to make conversation with them. Now he remembered their green upturned hats, their neat uniforms, lightweight in summer and woollen serge in winter. Green stockings, gloves and all the rest. He was quite overwhelmed.

The woman had reached the platform and was standing there, catching her breath a little. Perhaps she was remembering. She did not speak to him. He hesitated, wondering whether to turn to the right and travel towards his old home, or to turn left and sit in the park in which he had played as a boy. He chose the left, walking past the Soldiers' Memorial with its granite obelisk. In the old days it had seemed so tall. Now it was not tall, but again he found it difficult to cope with the memories of Anzac Day services, and his own private awe of it. As a child he

had peered through the grating, thinking dead soldiers slept there. On moonlit nights, they said, their ghosts would come out. He gave a brief, breathless laugh.

Climbing the stairs had made him breathless and he was glad to sit on a park seat. He was looking across the green lawn on which he had once gambolled, when she sat near to him. He felt his old heart pounding. He wanted to talk, but his throat seemed dry.

It was she who spoke first. 'I'm having a sentimental journey,' she said, 'and I suspect you are doing the same.'

He nodded, not daring to look at her. 'It was many years ago. I used to try to flirt with the Abbotsleigh girls on the station. They were going when I was coming.'

She smiled. 'I'm an old Abbotsleigh girl myself.'

He was interested, his shyness gone. 'I wonder whether I ever met you,' he said. 'Our ages must be about the same.'

Before he could stop himself he said, 'Sally Adams! Sally who lived near Abbotsleigh!'

It was her turn to be surprised. 'That's right,' she said. 'We did live near Abbotsleigh.'

She was about to ask, 'But who are you?' when it came to her. 'You're Goddy, young Goddy,' she said. He noticed that she shivered,

What a fine stamp of a woman she has remained, he thought. It was strange how others of your own years never seemed to age. You were one with them. Of course she had aged, but she was strong, not fragile, no signs of encroaching senility. He betted she was, as ever, strong as an ox. He dared not speak, feeling tears might come, and that would not do.

'You are Goddy,' she was insisting. 'Oh Goddy!'

The next thing was that there was an arm around him, and decades of old intimacy also wrapping around him.

He blinked at her through the coming tears. 'Sally, it is an incredible coincidence. I never thought to see you again.'

'I know you,' she said. 'I know your writing. I think I have read most of your books; your fiction, anyway. How often I have wanted to meet you. I suppose I have followed you through much of your life.' She grinned, 'Everything you write seems to be autobiographical.'

He felt unspeakably weak. Sally's arm, light on his shoulder, burned him and he wanted it to go on being that way. Recently widowed, he had felt it intolerable not to travel from Adelaide to Sydney, and to do this very sentimental journey. He had embarked at Wynyard Station, straight from the Airport bus, and had clattered over the same rails with the same sounds here that he had known decades ago.

He stared into Sally's eyes and felt the grief of widowhood melt away. Everything was sweet and gentle again. Old passion stirred, passion for life which he had lost when Connie went from him. He knew it had not been all bad. They had both agreed that grieving would be a waste of time if one predeceased the other.

Sally was looking at him with gentleness. 'Is Connie still with you?' Before he answered, she knew. She could see relief in his eyes at meeting her. 'We used to be in the Guides together,' she said, and the pain of her own widowhood re-visited her. More of a Stoic than this man, she felt

her sanctions weaken. She had better talk the feelings away.

'She was a one, that Connie of yours,' she said. 'Always the tomboy, always the little leader, always full of humour.'

He nodded. 'You have her to a T,' he said. 'She never changed. Defender of persecuted minorities, and always for the underdog.'

He laughed and looked across the beautiful green sward, and at the flowering gums and other trees.

'In a way I was afraid to take this sentimental journey. I thought the emotions might be too much for me.'

'They are just about that for me now,' said Sally. 'But how wonderful, Goddy. Fancy us meeting.'

He could not tell her, yet, how much of a goddess she had been to him. Perhaps later he could tell her that.

She was curious. 'How come you married Connie and not Joyce? You were always going to marry Joyce.' She did not tell him that he had been a blonde god to her, and she had passionately wanted to marry him.

He grinned. 'I was romantic and an idealist,' he said. 'When I enlisted I was only twenty-one, and marriage seemed years off to me. I thought I might come home maimed, so I didn't propose. In any case I thought I couldn't last out years of engagement. I think we all knew it would be a long war.'

She nodded. 'I used to be jealous of Joyce. Then she married Adam, and that was that. I kept hoping you might turn up, and I might have a chance.'

The laughter released them, and they sat close together, comfortable with an old friendship renewed. The words 'sweet' and 'right' kept coming

to him and he knew they were sentimental and inadequate, but he liked them.

'Were you going to look at your old home?' he asked. 'That was what I had in mind. Firstly to see your place, and then to look at ours and maybe some others.'

They rose, linked arms, and walked like an old married couple. Goddy liked the warm beating of his own heart, and Sally looked so much younger in repose. He peeled the years away to see her in her young, vibrant beauty. What an old sentimentalist you are, he told himself, but it is like finding your blood circulate afresh after chronic numbness.

She kept talking, commenting with dismay at the changes that had taken place. Musset's milk bar and confectionary shop had gone, and Perryman's, the fruiterer, was no longer there. What had once been a paddock with loquat trees was now a modern shop-ping centre. She kept grimacing, but the wonder of what had been was more than compensation. Com-parison was a relief.

With each step, memories kept flooding in. He noted that, curiously, there was no bitterness in memory and not one shadow. There had been shadows of course. Youth is a painful time even if also exciting. In some ways he had been a bit of a loner. It was not so much that he was unsocial: it was just that he seemed to think and maybe dream in ways that were different from the modes of others. Perhaps that was characteristic of writers. He did not know.

They kept saying to each other, 'Do you remember . . .?' and they surely did. They remembered many things, although they had not been particularly close friends in their childhood, in their youthful years.

Only at the last they had known a different close-ness.

'I remember you and the Morning Prayer services at old St Paul's,' he said. 'You would always arrive at about the Te Deum. We could set our watches by it—those of us who possessed watches. Your mum would bustle in, sails flapping, and your dad always in tails and striped trousers, high peaked collars, and you girls always embarrassed. It would not have been St Paul's without all that.'

He fancied her face crimsoned a trifle. Then she let out a sigh. 'You are right,' she said. 'We would always try to hurry Mum, but she thought she was hurrying us. We would hear the bell, and Dad would be standing outside with the Rolls waiting impatiently, but I don't think we were ever on time except for confirmations.'

'I remember our confirmation,' he thought. 'I remember looking across at you in the classes when our Rector, Kenneth Pain, would be telling one of his often-repeated stories about Cambridge. We used to exchange barely concealed grins. I liked you, Sally, but you were too far away from me. It was long before the days of Connie. She was not even living at Turramurra in those days. It was even before the days of Joyce.'

As they walked they felt a bit guilty at the orgy they were sharing as though they were living the good life all over again. Some of it had not been good—his father's dark moods for example—but now the bad times seemed to be of no consequence. Long ago he had gotten over the loss of Joyce his prime goddess in his athenaeum. Connie had made her to be a pale wraith. Connie was years younger than he but she had worn her life out

with the things they had done, the adventures, the children and the grandchildren.

Sally's old home was there, large, rambling, built in the early days of the century when Wahroonga was a suburb on the far outskirts of the metropolitan area. Only the wealthy lived there. In those early days the trains had been steam ones, puffing their way up to Hornsby from Milson's Point. There had been no Harbour Bridge, and certainly no Opera House. There had, however, been plenty of snobbery. Perhaps some of it had been cruel.

It was the Pacific Highway that shocked them. Once a two-lane affair, it now had six lanes and all filled with rushing traffic, some of it going south, and some north. He remembered Buttle's bakery on the corner, and the bakers' carts and vans that distributed bread for miles each day. He wished, for the matter of their age, that a road-crossing with lights might have been built, but she did not want to cross the road to peer into the old grounds, now possessed by Abbotsleigh College. He noticed there were tears, and so he swerved her northwards.

'Come and see our old place,' he said.

They walked past the reservoirs of the Water Board. One of them was high up. He and his friends used to climb its stairs every Sunday, loving to look across the countryside. He had loved heights, and would always scramble ahead of others. He also liked tall trees, especially pines. In the bush they would climb for birds' eggs, hoping for rare ones for their collections. They would have to hold in the mouth the one egg they allowed themselves to take from a nest. Occasionally an egg would break.

Back of the reservoir there had been an abandoned, haunted house. He knew it would not be there now, so he kept walking with Sally, delighting in the living dream.

They arrived at what had been 1683 Pacific Highway. Fancy remembering that after all these years! He had told himself he would not be shocked because he had heard their house—modern for the 1920s—had been sold and two high-rise apartment buildings created in its place. Even so, he *was* shocked; indeed he felt sick inside. Sally was also shocked. She talked in whispers to him, trying to comfort. He was glad she was there.

‘Sentimental fool!’ he told himself savagely.

There was a brick fence, low enough for them to sit on. They were both tired from walking and emotion, and were glad of the rest.

After a time she said, ‘You know where we are sitting?’

He nodded. ‘Of course,’ he said, and heard his voice as husky.

She almost whispered. ‘It nearly all happened just here.’

‘Yes,’ he said, so glad for her presence. ‘It just about all happened here.’ He looked at her, ‘You mean the little cob, eh?’

For a time she did not stir, overwhelmed by memory. Then she sighed. ‘Yes, the little cob. Little Jenny. Lovely Jenny. Fat, bouncing Jenny.’

It hadn’t happened on our property but on what we used to call ‘next door’ or ‘the Alderdices’ old place’. The first block on which my father had built our spacious bungalow was not enough land for him. We had a long block which went back far, and

which he turned into rolling lawns, concrete paths, a rose garden, vegetable garden and an orchard. When he finished all this he looked for fresh fields to conquer in his so-called ‘retirement’. One night the place next door burned down. The old weatherboard cottage was consumed to the ground. Land was plentiful everywhere, and cheap, because it was the time of the Great Depression, so my father bought it and turned it into a croquet lawn, more rose gardens, and a fishpond, to say nothing of a large aviary. It kept him occupied, and since his sons mowed the lawns and cut the miles of edges, he could indulge himself in his hobby. When he had nothing to do he would turn restless, a trait I find in my own self. It was then he would get to being moody.

Next door to our expanded property was a grocer’s shop. It was a fascinating place, and sold a wide range of delectables. Mr Alderdice was its owner and proprietor. To our horror it was burned down six months after the old weatherboard cottage. We assumed our father would buy it but even he balked at that. So it became ‘the vacant lot’ or ‘Alderdices’ old place’. We children used to rake it over for coins that might have fallen through the shop floor, but we didn’t find much. Then it grew over with lush grass, even up to your knees. I used to trap the beautiful Sydney waxbills which flew in for the seed. These firetail species I would put in our large aviary.

All of this until the day Sally’s father bought her a cob. Of course he had horses in the Adams’ stables, but he was training Sally to look after her own, and so he leased the grassy block on agistment. I remember the night I came home from cricket practice to find a fat filly cob standing in the knee-high pasture.

'When I first saw your cob, Jenny,' I found myself telling Sally as we sat on the brick fence, 'a kind of thrill went through me. I had always wanted to ride a horse, but my dad would not have dreamed of us having a horse. It was just not in his thinking.'

Sally said, 'I used to dream of having a mount for myself. I dreamed about it day and night. I liked the hacks Daddy had but they were his, not mine. I kept saying what I wanted and he kept referring me back to his stable.'

'Then late one afternoon a man came with the cob Daddy had ordered. I just about wept with joy. Daddy had no smiles. He was like that. He would give you something and immediately made the care of it a responsibility.'

'"Look, Sally," he told me, "you are going to have to water this animal. You are going to have to feed it with oats and chaff, and you are going to have to groom it regularly."

'Then he saddled Jenny up and we both went riding. We came to Alderdices' old lot, and he got me to ride around it. He had had a man bring a cement water trough and set it in. You remember the water was still laid on. He had a small hut built where I could lock up the saddle and bridle, and keep chaff and oats, a curry comb and brush. He had a man set a gate into the property. Now I was to have the keys to the gate and the shed. It was to be Jenny's paddock.'

Sally's voice seemed to grow young as she recounted the past. I was back as a boy peering through the hardwood palings. I had seen Sally riding, back straight, head held high, and envied her of a world I thought I would never know. The fact is that I came to know it a few years later when my father bought a beautiful country home and property,

and those still left in our family began farming. As yet this was veiled from me, and I almost lusted after riding Sally's cob. I began resenting my father for not building a stable and failing to give mounts to his children. I knew my resentment was childish because, apart from horses, we lived on a lovely property.

'When you and your dad went,' I said, 'I slipped over the fence and went up to Jenny. She just about ignored me, and when I climbed on to her back she just stood still. After a time she began cropping the grass. She never knew what a thrill it was to me. She never tried to buck me off. I just sat there, grasp-ing her mane, and hoping that maybe she would move.'

Beside me Sally smiled. 'I just knew someone was riding her bareback,' she said, 'and I hoped it was you. I used to long for you to appear and talk to me. I thought you the best-looking boy in the district. I always sought you out with my eyes in church because the family sat behind you, but you never showed signs of interest.'

I grinned. 'It was like trying to relate to a goddess,' I said. 'I was shy of all girls, even though I fantasised about them all at night, and you in particular.'

She sighed. 'What darling idiots we were. You never knew, but I laid a trap for you.'

'A trap?'

'Yes, a trap. In a way I deliberately neglected Jenny. After a time she ate that paddock out. When I came, the water trough would always be full. I reckoned you were riding my cob bareback. You remember that I caught you one day staring over the top of the paling fence. I didn't look at you, but I said, "Hullo there, Goddy. Like a ride on Jenny?" I guess you couldn't resist that. You didn't even have shoes on

your feet but you piled over the fence and my heart began bumping. I thought you looked wonderful.'

'I remember,' said Goddy. 'I felt it deeply, not having shoes on. I wondered what you would think of me, but you had saddled Jenny and it would be my first ride with saddle and bridle. It was what I wanted most in all the world.'

'I was hoping it was me you wanted, but I opted for the second best. You rode Jenny well. A born horseman.'

'After you went,' I said, 'I lived and relived that ride. Next year when I went to Agricultural High School I learned to ride on the hacks. Years later when we went to the farm I used to round the herd up with a spirited mare named Bonny. We also had a golden gelding and sometimes Dad would let me use him. He would buck you if he could.'

Sally rose reluctantly from the fence. 'I get a little stiff if I sit too long. Let's go down Lucinda Avenue. You used to go down it a lot. I would ride Jenny down there, hoping for a glimpse of you. I liked your wildness.'

I had been wild, in a way, but I had never spotted Sally. I only knew her in daydreams. We stood, now, on the pavement trying to find a break in the swift traffic so that we could cross the highway. Whilst we waited she told me about neglecting Jenny.

'I don't know how I did it,' she said. 'The grass was mainly eaten out but I used to do so many things that I even forgot Jenny. Maybe it was because I knew you fed her grass and vegetable tops and gave her bread. I suppose I knew she would never lack for

provender. The Guides kept me busy, and homework, and I was a bit mad about boys. I was crazy about tennis and dancing. So I would forget the cob.'

I had never believed she could do it, but she had done it, and I used to get mad at her. I thought it was unfair that she could have a cob all to herself and yet neglect it. I never knew that her father came in the late evening and inspected the food trough and the water supply. Sometimes I didn't fill up the water trough. I would be playing cricket, or come in late from the bush, from sitting there dreaming, or trapping birds for the aviary, or just roaming. My father would be at me for returning late to home. In all of this Jenny was sometimes neglected. Even so, I would often take bread or block-sugar to the fence and whisper to the cob. Jenny would come running and whicker away in horsy affection, and our friendship grew.

We had crossed the road, having to scuttle at the last, and that isn't easy for those in their seventies. Sally was breathing heavily.

'I remember the day Daddy called you,' she said. 'Weeks before, he had been angry with me, and was still angry. We actually had a family council, and he raved and stamped and stormed at us all. He said it was my last chance. I had better look after Jenny. He knew I had neglected her. I guess I resented his anger, but I tried to care for Jenny. I even hoped you might do it for me, but was never game to ask you. I would have given you the key to the gate and told you to saddle Jenny up and go for rides, but I was always like water when you looked over the fence at me.'

We were walking down the avenue I have loved most in my life. On the right was the old Abbotsleigh

playing field, an area they never used. Great blue gums had grown up in it, but we boys would play on the concrete pitch without mats, and aim our shots between the trees, and have a right royal time. I am sure we thought the field was ours. On the left were two, tall, twin firs, growing on the lawn beyond the pavement. They seemed like spires penetrating the late afternoon sky. Swarming in them, and fluttering about them were innumerable lorikeets. I could never remember seeing lorikeets in Wahroonga in those earlier days. I watched with wonder.

Sally was talking. 'We had our second family council and Daddy was furious. "I am going to give the cob to young Goddy," he was saying. "I know the boy looks after it. I have seen him in the evenings slip over the fence and bring greenfeed to Jenny, and I have watched him fill the water trough. He loves the little mare, and rides her bareback. I don't mind that, but now I am going to give him saddle and bridle, the key to the fodder store, and he can keep it all. I will pay the agistment as long as he wishes.'

'Mummy protested strongly, and you know that Mummy was really the strong one in our house, but this time she had no say. Daddy scarcely listened to her. As for me, I was torn between love of you and love of Jenny. I reckoned that if he gave her to you I could somehow establish a relationship. At the same time you might despise me for cruelty to Jenny, but I reckoned I could explain what was partly true, that I wanted to get to know you, that I had deliberately neglected the cob so that Daddy would move as he was now doing.'

Now I was bewildered. Something warm and something icy were doing battle within me. I was back again in the Adams' home to which Father

Adams had called me, and I was standing there, blushing furiously, wondering why I had been summoned, but with my heart in my mouth at the sight of Sally. This before the later time when I met my golden goddess, Joyce.

'I remember your father. He was red with anger, but he looked kindly at me. "Goddy," he said, "Sally's cob, Jenny, is now yours, if you will take it. I'll give you her, the saddle and bridle, and pay for the fodder and the agistment. I know you will care for her. What do you think about that?"

'What did I think?' I felt hot flushes at the thought of owning Jenny, but hotter flushes at the thought of taking her from you, Sally. You remember that I stammered and stuttered and protested against the thought, and said I could never take her from you, but your dad was insistent. He thundered it all out and you all looked so bedraggled and miserable that I wanted to rush out and be rid of it all. He was stronger than you, and he was stronger than me.'

Sally was undoubtedly back there in time, but she was not feeling it all over again. She had grown into a mature person, and the past did not hold her. 'Goddy,' she said gently, 'you feel it after all these years, don't you? I don't. So many beautiful things and people in life. Look at those lorikeets. I have never seen them like that anywhere and we are here in the evening and privileged to see a wonder. Goddy, I wanted you to have Jenny with all that was within me even though I loved her. If I protested it was to make sure Daddy would give her to you. Now you are a man: the past is quiet, so let it be.'

I grinned. 'I couldn't let it go then. Whether you admit it now or not you were weeping, weeping

terribly. So were your mum and the other girls. Even your young brother was upset. Somehow what happened was one of the greatest things in my life.'

Above us the lorikeets were chittering and chattering, settling and then being disturbed. It was colony talk, and it sounded wonderful to me who has always loved parrots. I took Sally's arm and propelled her to the footpath again.

'You remember the rest of the story?'

'I remember it well,' she said. 'You went off, riding on Jenny but your head was down, and you just didn't enjoy it. Two days later you were back again, with Jenny, and you told my dad that you just couldn't keep her. Something in you wouldn't allow that. You wanted me to have it again, and prove I could look after it.' She smiled. 'That was the glorious thing. Chivalry was still alive. There was a young knight and Daddy's honour was vindicated. He wanted to buy Jenny back from you but you were insistent. No, you wouldn't have payment for Jenny. Daddy was delighted, I know. He displayed all the signs of appreciation that he could show in his dignified way. I had Jenny back, and what I had always wanted to come to pass happened that day.'

I thought, 'What had she wanted?' but then I knew. Contact had been made between the two of us. We could conspire to share the caring for Jenny.

'Every time I came to attend Jenny, your head would appear over the fence. I picked the times I knew you would be there. You would help me get oats and chaff for the cob. Sometimes you would ride her around the lot. You even let me teach you things about settling and tightening the saddle girth, and the way in which to hold the reins. I loved every minute.'

It sounded good to me, but at that moment I was also a bit bewildered. My old bush had gone, the bush where there had been Christmas bells, flannel flowers, creamy clematis, patches of tea-tree, and, in December, the crimson stars of the Christmas bush.

She noticed my confusion and held my left hand. 'It has all gone, Goddy,' she said. 'Like a lot of the past, it has gone.'

I said thickly, 'The past never goes.'

She agreed. 'The past never goes, but things change and it is a different present for the ones who follow us.'

I had to admit that some of the tall blue gums had been preserved in the grounds of these fabulous mansions. Those gums were taller than ever we had seen them. Maybe then, Christmas bells bloomed in December, but on the whole that past was gone. We went down into the valley looking at the new houses which, themselves, had gently aged and were part of a new decor.

She said softly, 'They were really good days, the best ever.' Her sigh was one of delight, not pain. 'We all had our hard times. Like Connie, I was a bit of a tomboy, but like her I loved you.'

I said, 'I never knew her in those days. She was younger than us both. Our family went to Boxhill when my father bought that lovely property. We farmed, and I wrote stories at night when only my brother knew, as he painted in a back boxroom. Just before the war I met Connie at a coaching college, but I thought her a mere slip of a thing. I hardly noticed her. All my memories were of Wahroonga.'

Now it was softly dark. The street lights had come on, burnished glowing balls around which the night

insects were already crowding. My memories were rioting.

'Perhaps we should return to the station,' she said. 'We might even have walked too far already. Not young like we used to be.'

We walked and chatted about many things. Any loneliness we had by now was faded. There seemed nothing foolish in walking hand-in-hand. The few folk we passed must have thought us as aged man and wife, but we felt young. We looked curiously at the lot which had once been vacant and where Jenny had cantered out her heart, Jenny whom I had owned for two precious and disturbed days.

At the station garden, the tall, smooth palms were under a presentation light. The platform had lost its crushed granite gravel and was black bitumen. Yet it was our old station, and the beloved name was there for all to read. We sat on the wooden garden seat, and soon heard the clattering of the train in the distance. It came in with bright headlights, and there were people alighting and others getting on.

'Where do you get off?' I asked her.

She said, 'I go to Wynyard. Then a taxi to Double Bay. We have a penthouse there.' She sensed my disappointment about the penthouse. 'A family thing,' she said. 'On Monday I go back to Toowoomba and then out to the sheep station. My son manages the property. I could never bear one of those retirement villages.' She smiled. 'Neither could you,' she said.

I don't know why disappointment flooded me. I was to get off at Chatswood where my old friend John lives. He is younger but, even so, is an old bachelor. I didn't know what I had expected from our meeting in the park, and our shared sentimental

journey. Had I really thought our lives might come together?

I think she knew what I was thinking, for she squeezed my hand. 'You build up so much in fifty to sixty years,' she said. 'It is better to meet as we have done and then not make much of it. Our life is back with our children and their children.'

'I will write,' I said. 'I will send you some of my writing.'

She smiled 'I know most of it, but you do that, Goddy.'

The train raced from station to station, and soon it was Chatswood. She came to the sliding doors to see me off.

'I guess I'll see myself in a story, a special story.'

I shook my head violently. 'Never!' I said. 'Too personal and intimate to let others know.'

She grinned, and for a moment she was the young, beautiful and pert tomboy, the lovely Sally. She gave an affectionate wave. 'Too beautiful *not* to let others know,' she said, and she was gone.

I walked another set of station stairs and pondered what she had said. She was right, of course. The whole marvellous event was too wonderful to keep to one's self. I remembered that John had a computer in his study, and already my fingers were itching. As you can see, the itch has gone.

It was, indeed, too intimate and too personal and too wonderful *not* to tell the world.

The Francines

THE FRANCINES lived opposite to us in the North Shore suburb in which we lived in the city of Sydney. I am talking about 'a long time ago'. On the whole they were a quiet family and we never had interaction with them socially. They kept to themselves and somehow we knew that the father was a business man in the city. I can never remember even seeing him face-to-face. He would go to his garage set back on their red gravel drive, and drive out in their posh car. His wife was a gracious woman and although she did not do the work of gardening, she directed her gardener, and was often seen picking flowers or just walking through their well-landscaped property. They had a tall, spacious home with three floors. Mrs. Francine obviously admired our gardens with their hundreds upon hundreds of rose bushes, but she never came close enough to comment. She had her own smaller motor vehicle, which was something in those days.

The boys—the two of them—were despised by my two older brothers. I was never sure why this was the case, but my brothers were in cahoots over tormenting them in every possible way. Looking back, I am sure part of the reason was that they went to a private school and we did not. In our suburb, the school you went to designated the class you belonged to. Sydney's North Shore was notorious for that. It always puzzled me but then the mysteries of

humanity continue to intrigue me. I only mention it, not so much out of self-consciousness but since the matter of social differences is really the point of this yarn.

The two boys were Kevin and Alwyn and they went to Knox College, and not Barker College. We classed the Knox boys as effeminate and had a rude word for them which I did not understand at the time. I know now that it was wholly unwarranted. The Barker boys were quite masculine. They were also less tidy than the Knox boys. The two schools played each other in cricket, football, tennis and athletics, but our prejudiced minds barracked for Barker and not for Knox. We had no fear of the former losing to the latter, but I guess that must have been the case, time and again. Every day, as a primary school pupil, I had to pass Knox College, and I would peer in, intrigued. Don't get the idea that I was envious: far from it, but I wanted to check out these curious boys and youths who thought of themselves as true humans but obviously were not. There was something quite wrong with them or why would my brothers continually persecute them? If these things were to happen today, my brothers would be had up for discrimination, and rightly so.

Our father was most masculine. A dentist by profession but retired, he worked tirelessly to make our gardens the best in the suburb. We were famed for our hundreds upon hundreds of rose trees including standard and climber varieties. I can remember the names of some—Pink Radiance, Red Radiance, Cattia Dilby Botroyd—I loved pronouncing that one—and others. In the evenings, generally after tea and mostly in the summer, our father taught us to box on the back lawn. He always had a secretive look

when we asked him where he had learned, but he slowly let it drop that he had been half-professional as a pug in the ring. He romanced about so many things that we were never quite sure. As a father, he was a good dentist but we certainly were encouraged to use our fists.

The Francine boys seemed peaceable enough. They kept away from our fists. Indeed, they walked to College and made sure it was not on our side of the highway. They never responded to taunts, and there were plenty of these. My sensitive and delicate nature prevents me from repeating the crude, insulting and demeaning cries of my brothers, Cecil and Norman. They also had developed a way of derisive crowing; almost magpie chortling, you might say. I held back, wondering. I did not easily question my brothers' way of life. Why should I? It was from them that I was supposed to learn human behaviour.

Myself? I was a bit of a rugged child. I almost said 'ragged'. I was a bit of a loner with a deep sense of justice. It was this which kept me from entering into the melee of the classes. I rather liked Kevin and Alwyn and almost envied them. My father had a rather suave Chrysler and our house and spacious property were certainly superb, so why did we not also go to Colleges? I think having nine children and all of us living in the Great Depression were two of the factors, but then again I cannot be sure. I noticed that my father was always a little uneasy socially with people the equivalent of Father Francine, and that he would quickly talk about what he knew best—dentistry. Mind you, he was a dental surgeon and that was something in those days. Later on, my brother, Norman, had a friend from the top strata of

our suburb, and my father was quick to welcome him and make him at home. The young man could do nothing wrong, until, of course, he joined the Communist Party, a fact which dazed my dad, and almost broke his faith. It was only when the young man joined the RAAF that he was received back into the bosom of my family: but here I race ahead of my story. I was telling you about myself as an urchin.

My mother outclassed my dad socially—something for which he never quite forgave her. I knew she had never done any housework as a child and even as a young woman, but then my father's family also had maids and house servants. She never knew how to cook or sew, but she was a great elocutionist and a singer, and knew how to conduct tea parties and the like. I am sure Dad was proud of her. The strange thing was that she was proud of me. I grant that she had an Irish sense of prescience which my father, whose background was English, could never understand. He was suspicious of her relationship with me. She would dress me every morning as though I were going to a party. Polished shoes, socks with garters, neat short pants, an ironed shirt, and—if you please—a bow tie! She would comb my hair, allowing slight freedom to the curls, make sure my ears were clean and would send me off with an affectionate pat.

It was rarely a success. By the time I reached school—a couple of miles away—my shoes were scuffed and dusty, my bow tie awry, if not lost, my hair tousled and my shirt looking as though it belonged to yesterday. Mrs Parr, our infant mistress, would put her hands on her hips, look at me as I arrived late, and deliver a lecture. I had certain ways of dealing with her, one of which was to affect deep

humility along with a certain kind of repentance for my sorry appearance. My mother never complained at the loss of many bow ties but my father growled incessantly about my high rate of shoe leather wear.

The point of telling this is that I wondered how the Knox boys arrived looking so neat and fresh at their school, and I didn't. I thought their ability was inbred and went with the social territory. I think it left a kind of mental scar on me and made me feel quite inferior to these other boys who so lacked in vibrant masculinity. Mind you, much of my urchin look came from scrapping with other boys, especially over injustices. I loved taking on bullies and debunking and dethroning them, and I think I was never a bully. I also think something of resentment was developing within me over the matter of class differences. I believe that I grew out of it later, but childhood images remain with me, especially the images of Kevin and Alwyn.

I remember my two brothers throwing stones and anything that happened to be at hand when the Francine boys passed either to or from school. There was always granite metal at the side of the bitumen road. Pretty crude-looking stuff it was. Also, in those long ago days, there were coarse balls of hard, dry horse manure. There were baker's carts, milk carts, fruit and vegetable carts, ice carts, and bottle-o's carts. There were also carts of the second-hand merchants, and once a week the cart of the man who cried, 'Claas praaps', for housewives used a tall, thin sapling with a fork at the top to keep up their long lines of otherwise sagging washing set out to dry. What I mean is that, with all those horses, there was no lack of manure.

The Francine boys kept themselves under admirable restraint and this made my heart sink because I was sensing that they were a breed beyond and above my fighting, urchin class. Somewhere in me, although very faintly, I admired them. The day my brothers hid behind our brick fence and aimed their .22 air guns at the Francine boys and neatly cut the top off their straw boaters stunned me. I admired their marksmanship, but I felt sad for the boaters and the Francine boys. They took it silently and walked on, their boaters ruined. My brothers thought it a huge joke.

A sort of retribution came the next day. The brothers came out, wearing their ruined boaters but shaking their fists at Cecil and Norman. They were so enraged that they spluttered.

They said, 'If we had had our catapults you would never have got away with this.' They pointed to their hats.

My brothers exploded with laughter, but even behind that scorn I felt a tinge of uneasiness. I admired their fiery return, but the two boys resumed their equanimity. They never looked our way. My brothers ceased their persecution, and the boys insisted—it seemed with pride—on always wearing their ruined boaters as university lecturers used to love their moth-eaten and tattered academic gowns. Strangely enough, the boaters seemed to me to be souvenirs of a successful battle or maybe even banners of triumph. How was it, then, that I still regarded these young men as scarcely masculine? If they had been like me, they would have plotted, waited their time, and one day belted the daylights out of my brothers. That was my line of thought in those days.

We left our beautiful home and property. My aristocratic mother was dismayed, but she had agreed to go on the farm my father had obviously dreamed about as a boy. Suddenly we were farmers and working from early dawn till late at night. Memories of our former life began to fade. Cecil had departed for training at an Agricultural Experimental Farm. Norman and I had trained at an Agricultural High School and my father had dreamed of cows and pigs and horses as well as ploughed paddocks, crops and fodder for years. Cecil then kept his pugnacious self away from us, farming on the Southern Highlands, and Norman and I were painter and writer respectively at night when our father slept. Our sisters kept growing up, gaining beauty and attention from the local fellows and the men in the RAAF base, not far distant from us.

The war broke out which they began to call 'World War II' and I enlisted. Cecil was the first to enlist—in the footsloggers, the infantry. Then I enlisted—in Signals. Afterwards, an older brother, Francis, also enlisted in the infantry. Norman became a ground engineer in Quantas, and Ray, our eldest brother who carried our mother's poise of life, was an official in a famous British airline, but in reality was in the cloak-and-dagger profession.

It was at the Recruiting Depot in Sydney town that I met the Francine brothers. They were like us, carrying their gear—khaki pants and tunics, underwear, army boots, and, of course, slouch hats. I don't think they recognised me. They were tramping along in some semblance of a squad. I tried to imagine them in outfits the quartermaster had thrown at them, and I began to giggle. They did not see me. Strange to say that by this time I had changed in my view of

clothes. I had my outfit meticulously altered and fitted by a civilian tailor. I had a way of spot and polishing which made my boots shine like glass, and my slouch hat slouched at just the right angle, no more, no less.

My parents were quite proud. So were the numerous girls friends whom I kept at arm's length. My sisters would go into peals of delighted, admiring laughter. I did a demanding physical trainer's course, and had my double stripes within a few weeks. I developed a rich corporal's voice which carried a long distance. I was perfect in drill commands. I was on my way to good things.

I often passed the Francine boys but they seemed not to know me, and I gave no indication that I knew them. I thought they were a bit casual about the whole thing. Also they were in the footsloggers, a fact which amazed me. They even seemed to like it. We were recruited to various units and did not meet again until Bathurst camp, where we melted in summer and froze in winter. Toughened up, we were hustled aboard the *Queen Mary* and made our silent way amid the perils of lurking U-boats, magnetic mines, and other dangers. Being in such a convoy was unforgettable. Somehow I never saw the Francine brothers but then there were tens of thousands of us in that great vessel.

We arrived in Singapore, were sent up north and were housed in army barracks on the outskirts of main cities. As we were at Brigade headquarters, we rarely saw the men of the infantry battalions as on the one hand we passed lines out to them and on the other we connected with Signal Headquarters to the north. I was happy to remain a corporal, because it was a life I could cope with. I thought I might even

be officer material but this was not recognised at the time. I doubt whether I had an ounce of political ability, and so I failed to rise in the ranks. I think you can detect the social consciousness thing, but my moral integrity remained undefiled. Sometimes I caught my colleagues giving certain looks of unbelief, and perhaps I was a bit naive, but I was reasonably happy. I wrote reams of poems, stories and articles. They piled up in my haversack.

Occasionally I would hear of the Francine boys. They were getting to be a bit famous. 'Good with their fists,' was the opinion of some of their battalion. That astonished me until I remembered vaguely that Knox College had a great gym. Perhaps they had learned the art there, yet they had never tried it out on Cecil and Norman. I was a bit puzzled, especially as I was a boxing instructor in my own section.

One day I saw them on route march. We had been north and were coming south. They were going north. We crossed, all of us with slung rifles, ammunition, heavy haversacks, sweating in short shirts and Bombay bloomers, and, of course, singing. Aussie servicemen have a special swing to their marching, almost a slouch, you might say, and although the Tommie officers thought it too informal, the locals—the natives as we called them—loved it.

They would shout what we thought was 'Hullo Joe!' but was in fact a greeting in Malay. We would shout back, 'Hullo Joe!' and their delight would multiply. I think they found the British troops a bit too formal.

We passed the Francine boys. They looked straight at me, seemed surprised and then they grinned in recognition. I wondered, 'Where have all the Knox

boys gone?' They seemed so unlike the tidy, formal youths I had once known. I felt almost uneasy but gave them an answering grin and nod. We all tramped on.

I began to hear strange things about the Francines. They were still privates, humble footsloggers. I knew enough about the old school tie to know they should have been officers by now. That was generally how it went. Even in my case, only a mistake had kept me back from a commission, not a mistake of mine but one made back at the Recruiting Depot in the Showground in Sydney. No matter: that is another story.

That the Francine brothers were not even non-commissioned officers surprised and intrigued me. I began to ask questions of my friend, the Orderly Room corporal, who knew everything. He got to the Brigade Major and that person told me, personally, that the boys had knocked back any suggestion of rise in rank. They wanted the life of privates, and that was that!

I began to wonder why but was too dumb to understand in those days. It was years later that it filtered through, and then to my astonishment. After jungle training, trips on rafts down jungle rivers, much sweating, having glorious adventures on motor cycles—Beezers and Nortons—and learning the various branches of communications, we were moved down the Peninsula to the East Coast to a place called Mersing. The infantry were secreted in the rubber plantations and even in jungle locations, and we prepared a sort of Malayan Tobruk and settled in to wait for 'the little yellow baskets from the north' as we called them humorously. Cecil by this time was in Tobruk as one of the famous Rats, and I

felt a kinship with him, though as yet we had not been besieged. I remembered my father's phobia of Japan invading Australia. He had thought of himself as a bit of a prophet in that respect and I thought he could yet be right.

On training exercises we would often contact the infantry battalions as we also did the brigade artillery regiment. They were great times, but some of the troops were bored, itching for a fight after almost two years of training. Time and again I saw the Francine men, and usually they were in Bren carriers. This did not mean they had finished with footslogging: far from it. Bren carriers were our closest vehicles to armoured tanks and we loved them. We also loved the minimally few ack-ack guns that awaited the Nipponese air invaders.

It happened. The Japanese came. We were dug in to await them and withhold them forever. Our Brigadier was a great person as a man and a fine tactician as a soldier, but orders came from High Command to withdraw towards Singapore in the south. The infantry had engaged the enemy north, and also about twenty-six miles to the east of us. My men were beginning to get a bit scared of me and my adventurous antics. The urchin militarism of my boyhood was beginning to show.

'You are out for bloody medals,' some objected. 'You'll do crazy things.'

I hadn't thought about it like that. In retrospect I think that maybe they were right, but that was not how I saw it at the time. Something of that unholy holiness of war was stirring me, as others.

We made what they called 'a strategic withdrawal' to Singapore Island, and, after a day or two to recover

from weeks of wearying work, the hellish battle was on. From the other side of the Straits of Johore, the Nipponese troops poured a quarter of a million shells just into our sector of defence, battering everything. The skies were filled with Zeros and Jap bombers, and havoc rained on us without much opportunity to respond: our anti-aircraft weaponry was almost non-existent. What did operate was most effective, but when the oil tanks were set ablaze and the soot of the oil clouds descended on us, we were blackened until only the whites of our eyes could be seen. Our clothes were filthy and we were donging shells on the horizontal and bombs from the vertical.

It was then that I saw the Francine boys. They were captaining Bren carriers, but doing it without any form of rank other than that of privates. They were born leaders. I heard that in the midst of the fighting they were offered stripes and pips, but they resolutely refused them. Incredibly, they sometimes recognised me as I rode my Norton, and they gave cheering recognition. They seemed to be in one continuous hilarious mood, and were whooping it up. I still could not comprehend them, but I began to love them. I admired them tremendously. They were out in the front line, the rough and tumble of it. I thought of their sedate home, their gentle but dignified mother, and of my brothers trying to frighten them.

Suddenly it was all over. I mean, we had capitulated to the Japanese General. We were taken into prison camps. In those early days I never saw the boys from the Francine battalion. The next thing I heard was that they had gone north to the Burma-Thailand Railway. Then I heard nothing more of

them. When some of the troops returned in pathetic, emaciated and diseased condition, I asked about Kevin and Alwyn but the silent wraiths slowly shook their heads. They knew of them but had not seen them.

We came home on a beautiful hospital ship which had been a Dutch luxury cruiser and it was in superb condition. After a breath-taking ticker tape, almost hysterical, reception in Sydney town, we were taken to the Repatriation Hospital, examined, and then given temporary home leave. We were about to discover what and who we were in this society which had changed so much.

A little later we were called, some of us, to Government House. There was a ceremony and we who had been called were given medals. I watched along the line to see who some of the fellows might be. Not all of us were ex-prisoners of war, but some were. I felt a thrill run through me when I saw Alwyn and Kevin called out, together. Their citation was read out, and it was one of the most marvellous I heard that day. I felt weak as water and trembled. I didn't tremble as much when my own name was read out. I had lived with the fact and congratulations of it before this day. My mother was as gracious as ever, and so adoring. My father showed admiration he had rarely given to any of us. He had always been a demanding person, and mostly on himself.

The Francines walked up to us and shook my hand. I introduced them to my parents and they were polite to them in a gentle way. I felt I loved these guys as I had few others.

Father showed a trace of the stiffness he always had in what he would have called 'high social company'

but Mother was very much at home. The two decorated men were most relaxed. Their uniforms were still those of privates, and almost informal. For the first time, I met their father, and he was a tall, upright, grey-haired man with a stiff way of bowing and speaking, but was most friendly. Mother Francine was as gentle and gracious as ever. I wondered dryly who of the two was the stronger. I guessed the boys had received most from her. Perhaps she instructed them in how to go about the matter of my brothers.

I wanted to talk personally to Kevin and Alwyn and ask them how they ticked, why it was they had refused commissions when they so much deserved them. Having become a sergeant, I had been recommended for one but being badly wounded, the matter had lapsed. I had only half-regretted it.

After a few minutes of socialising, we drifted off to a Vice-Regal tea party and were lost to one another it seemed, forever.

That, however, was not the end of the story. It was time to marry, as it was time to continue writing and to do a bit of farming. Later it was training for a profession and then it was the profession. My four brothers had done well in the war, a decoration here and there, one being rewarded for his cloak-and-dagger work with an MBE, and so on. We all sought to settle whilst our parents pressed on for many years and I guess were proud not only of their sons but also of their daughters. I am sure that on the whole they had given us great training.

Much later, my wife Constance and I took one of our rare holidays when our children were off our hands, married or in some employment away from

home. After the war, we had farmed for a short time on the North Coast of New South Wales, and we decided to go back, see our old home, and go on into Queensland. We did all of these things.

What intrigued us were the banana plantations, especially with their great hands of fruit encased in blue plastic to keep off—we supposed—the frosts and the predators, namely the fruit-eaters, flying foxes and the like. Miles and miles of the high hills were thick with palms, and these concentrated, green groves were occasionally relieved by the more open pineapple farms. We drove dreamily until we came to a banana plantation that had a selling stall in a rustic setting and an invitation to have a Devonshire tea with North Coast strawberry jam and cream. We looked at each other and nodded.

'Devonshire tea,' Connie said, slightly licking her lips.

There was no one at the stall so we knocked on the door of what we thought must be the tea room. A wholesome woman opened to us and invited us in. We were in something of an old-fashioned parlour, with deep lounge chairs, occasional tables, and a couple of old dressers with old-fashioned crockery, Willow pattern.

We expressed our surprise at the delightful room and said we would like some Devonshire tea.

She looked at the clock. 'The men should be up any moment,' she said. 'They like talking to visitors.' She had a kindly twinkle to her eye.

We noticed she didn't use the words 'strangers' or 'customers'.

She had a large, black kettle on the hob of a combustion stove, and was pouring the tea to our requirements when the men walked in. I glanced up

and at first did not recognise these two sunburned, work roughened, beginning-to-wrinkle men. They greeted us warmly, then one of them stared at me.

He almost shouted. 'Denny Carn or I'll be damned!' he said.

His brother said simply 'Never!' He meant, 'Why, yes!'

We shook hands warmly, reluctant to let go our gripping. My mind flashed back to our boyhood days, and could not believe the difference in the men.

It was a grand time, sitting there sipping tea, talking, nattering about boyhood days, and army days, and days so long after the war.

'Are your parents still alive?' I asked, and they nodded, though a trifle sadly.

'Quite aged,' Kevin said, 'and now they are being cared for in a nursing home, but they still have good spirit.'

I had a thousand questions I wanted to ask, but held back. Instead, I told Constance who they were, and she remembered me speaking about them, often. Alwyn was interested in that.

'Denny talked about us, eh?' he asked, intrigued. Then he said, 'What did he tell you?'

'Many things,' Connie said archly. Just as she was about to speak, another woman walked in. She had been making jam in the back kitchen. The two were the wives of the men.

I was looking at them, wondering how these two could have gone to Abbotsleigh or Presbyterian Ladies College, or some such place. Some of my faded, tattered, class consciousness was beginning to return and I didn't like it.

It was as though Alwyn discerned this, and he grinned. 'We met these two when they were very

young ladies. Met them at Lismore after the war. Kevin and I decided we didn't want Dad's city, commercial life. The army had spoiled us for offices, so we came north, looking for work and hoping to get some land. These two country girls picked us up.'

He and Kevin didn't try to hide their grins. 'You remember that after three and a half years in a prisoner of war camp, any woman looked beautiful. Remember our saying, 'There are no ugly women?'

He kept grinning and the women made a pretence at pouting, but they were in good humour.

Kevin said, 'They were beauties, anyway.' He looked a trifle shy. 'They still are,' he said.

It was my turn to smile at Connie. 'Same happened with me,' I said, and the three women ex-changed looks.

I sat silent for a while, trying to take in the incredible difference between the quiet Knox boys of my youth and these bronzed and ageing farmers. I shook my head in silent unbelief, not realising what I was doing.

Alwyn grinned. 'I think I know what you are thinking,' he said. 'How does it come about that we are so different from what we were as boys? Well, in a way we owe it all to your family.'

'No! I said, unable to comprehend.

'Yes,' he said firmly. 'You were no doubt a threat to us, but you were also a confrontation.'

He grinned at me. 'Not so much you as your brothers. We always remember Cecil and Norman. We admired them as very masculine, very aggressive, and we writhed under their clear contempt of us. They despised us.'

I shook my head wonderingly. None of this was making good sense.

Kevin went on. 'We knew what you called us. You used the words, at least your brothers did. You were somewhat different. We liked our College, were proud of it, in fact, and we belonged to the cadet corps, and we were both athletic, but there was still some kind of a stigma, just in belonging to Knox.'

I said lamely, limply, 'Connie went to PLC down the line. Both Presbyterian, eh?'

Kevin seemed not to hear me, though he flashed a quick smile to Connie. 'Alwyn and I always wanted to prove ourselves to you people, your family, your way of life.'

'Fancy that!' I was saying in my mind, never daring to voice it aloud.

He nodded as though he had heard. 'Fancy, eh?' he said. 'We lived like pampered lords without doubt. Servants, a proud father, a doting mother, and every luxury, but it didn't sit properly. We just didn't know how to prove ourselves. The thing was always with us.'

Well, the other thing had always been with me, but I wasn't telling them for the moment.

Alwyn took up the tale. 'We so disliked all we were in, especially moving into the commercial world, dressing appropriately, catching the morning train, always wearing and doing what was expected of us, going through the right motions, having the right social friends, that the war came as a great relief to us. Also an escape.'

'We joined up with the footsloggers,' Alwyn said. 'We were determined to prove ourselves, to live with the rank and file and to sweat the old things out of us.'

It was then that I gasped like an old asthmatic. I stood up, but kept my cup of tea in my hand to give

me some coverage. 'To think I always regarded you as snobs, and to think I felt inferior and angry because you were immensely wealthy and we were not in that same class.' I shook my head and it seemed tears fell in my tea. Perhaps it was sweat from the North Coast heat.

The two men looked at each other, and shook their heads. 'Fancy you thinking that way,' they said. 'We knew you fellows boxed each other, played sport, flirted with the girls and were real men. We wanted to be like you. When we were offered commissions in the army we refused them.'

'You took over as officers during the action,' I said. 'You were born officers. I saw you and what you did and the way you went about it.'

Their smiles disappeared and a hard look came into their faces. 'We know what you mean. If we are right it is also what happened to you.'

I nodded, too full to speak. Suddenly there was silence in the room. We all sat still, not even sipping our tea.

Then Alwyn said, 'We are glad you came today. It's been a great time. Almost like an exorcism.'

Kevin saw my puzzlement. 'You are kind of certifying us as being real men, the ones we wanted to be.'

I nearly gasped again. 'You were always that,' I said. 'I always admired you for taking my brothers' treatment and not fighting back. I admired, and even envied, your dignity. I felt ashamed of us and our ways.'

After a time, laughter exploded. The women did not fully understand when the laughter became uncontrollable and the tears flowed down our cheeks. We got to slapping our thighs. Finally we were exhausted and reached for our cups of tea.

I looked at them with wonder. 'What a day!' I exclaimed. 'I never thought it would come in my life. I have always thought there was something lacking in me. I have even felt inferior because of you two and your family. An exorcism indeed.' I chuckled faintly and shook my head.

'Stay some days,' Alwyn insisted. 'It would be grand to go over old times.'

Connie and I were due in Grafton to stay with relatives, so we couldn't do that. I think I would have liked such a stay, but time didn't permit.

They were disappointed but I could see, also, that they were delighted with our meeting. No less delighted than I was. I looked at these two farmers and marvelled. I looked at their wives and marvelled more.

There was one thing more I wanted to know. I knew they must have had children. What schools did they send them to? They looked faintly surprised. Then they comprehended.

'We would have sent them anywhere,' they said, 'even to Knox and PLC if that had been a good idea, but we wanted them here, near us. You can see them over there, in the photographs. All married now.'

Connie and I scanned the photographs with interest. The children looked sensible, intelligent, the boys handsome, the girls beautiful. I was glad I had asked about them. A good family dynasty was in the making.

The men came to the car, ran their eyes over it, grinned and nodded. 'Nice job,' they said.

Suddenly, as if never fully before in this way, I realised what it was to be truly human: no pretence, no fear, no social consciousness. I could not withhold

from hugging them both and they returned it with fervour. I guessed hugging of men was not their habit, but they were sincere. It had been a great time for us three men. Both had tears in their eyes, as I did. The women were still faintly puzzled but they must have thought it a male mystery.

Before leaving, I leaned over and said to Alwyn and Kevin, 'An exorcism indeed!' They nodded at that, vigorously. I moved off slowly and we kept waving until out of sight.

'What was all that about an exorcism?' Connie asked. She was happy enough, but mystified.

'I'll tell you one day,' I said, risking her ire. 'But this I can tell you now: you have three very happy, very released men, three buddies for life.'

I think she caught the gist of it, so she smiled into my face. 'Hardly ever seen you as happy as this,' she said.

As we began to flash past plantations with their blue bags of plastic, and the pawpaw trees and the pineapple plantations, my happiness expanded, and I wondered whether it might blow up my old heart, but then I didn't think it would. I thought it might even make me more youthful than before. I also thought I had more grist for my writing mill. Its machinery would be better lubricated than ever.