

About the author . . .

'Bingham's stories have an odd elusive charm of their own . . . we can see what his world is made of and feel its full impact.' Douglas Stewart, poet, past Literary Editor *The Bulletin*.

'Whether he is being kindly or critical, he is always perceptive, always probing at the heart of things, always fascinated by human diversity.' Colin Thiele, notable writer of fiction for young and old.

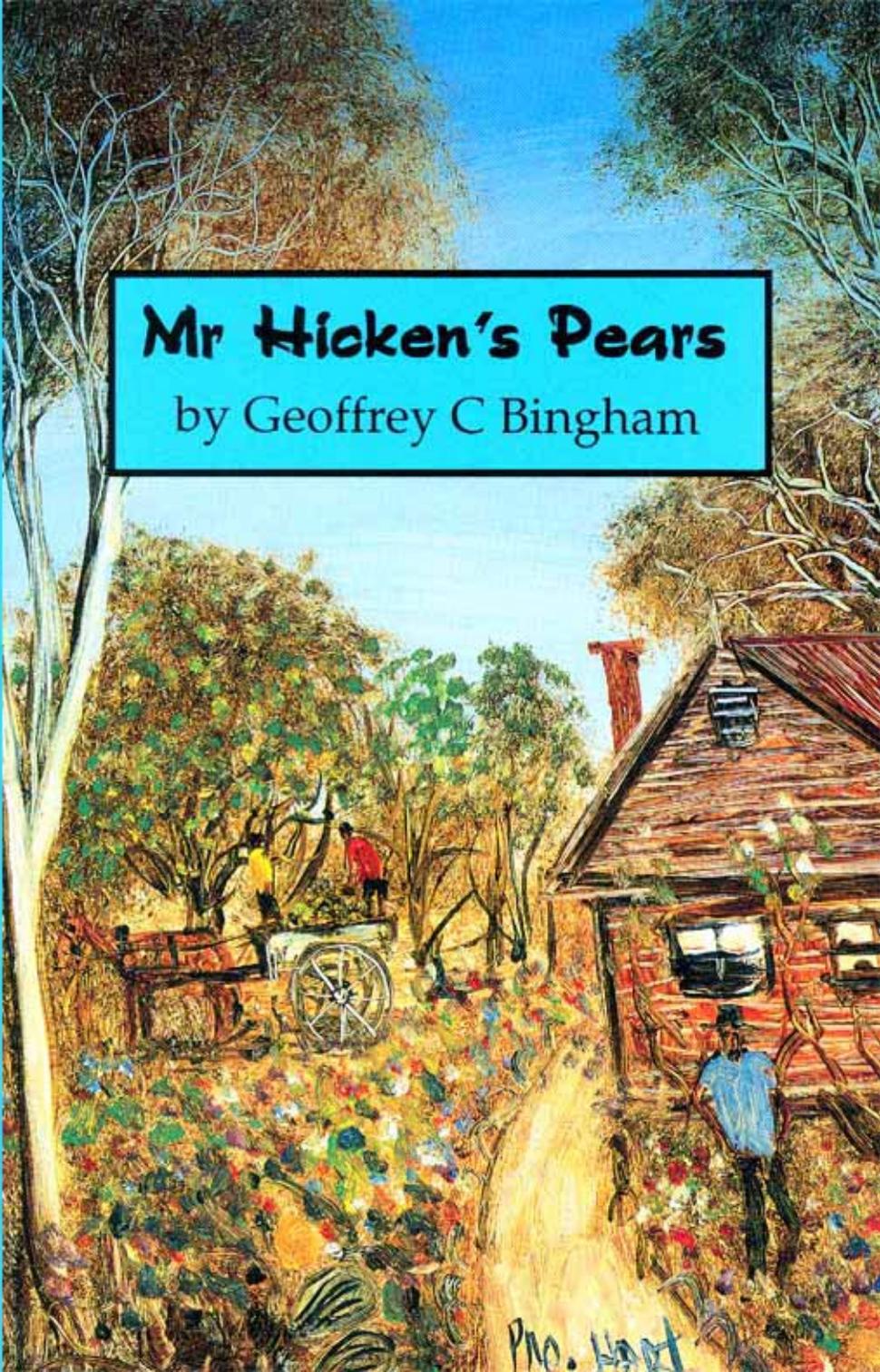
'His prose is tight, his action quick . . . characterisation is insightful and warm . . . an appealing kindness and integrity about his stories.' Andrew Lansdown, poet, winner of John Bray Poetry Award 1994.

'His stories are homely and wholesome tales reflecting the scents and sounds of bush life; the struggle of man and beast to survive; and the knock-about characters known to us all.' Sir Marcus Loane, former Anglican Archbishop of Sydney and author of many books.

'Geoff's writing captures the essence of Australian life and portrays the heart of the people.' Rob Linn of Historical Consultants, Australian historian, prolific author, including the recent *Their Sacrifice* (book and CD Rom) for 'Australia Remembers 1945-1995'.

'Geoffrey's literary gifts shine in this difficult field of the short-story writer in these concise tales . . .' Sir Edward (Weary) Dunlop, AC, CMG, OBE, eminent surgeon, renowned Australian and former POW.

Troubadour Press Inc.



Mr Hicken's Pears

by Geoffrey C Bingham

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

To Command the Cats
The Days and Dreams of Arcady
The Raymond Connection
The Boy, the Girl, and the Man
Tall Grow the Tallow-woods
Laughing Gunner
The Boy in the Valley
Mr Piffy Comes Home
Where Conies Dwell
The Lion on the Road
Strong as the Sun
The Return of the Lorikeets

Mr Hicken's Pears

Geoffrey C. Bingham

Troubadour Press Inc.
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Introduction

Geoff Bingham has spent a lifetime polishing the craft of short story writing. Not content with being a natural storyteller, whose voice one can almost hear as a story progresses, he also ranges over many of the strategies and devices that give the best short stories their fine bone structure. This skeleton structure is never obvious, but is always fleshed out into a living story.

The purpose of this volume is to provide for secondary students a group of stories well suited for classroom study and personal reading. The collection illustrates the range of Bingham's writing, from the pungent, evocative stories of war and prison life, through slices of modern life in ordinary families where people are working hard to understand each other, to the almost idyllic stories of country life in the slow lane, where growing superb vegetables brings community esteem.

The intriguing thing is that Bingham can take us right inside his characters in all of these situations. We lug rocks with the boys who build a dam for Mr Hicken in the hope that he will give them some of his famous pears. We feel the awkwardness of Private Amnig as he is hailed as a hero in his home town. We experience the gut-wrenching jolt of discovering another's identity in *Happy Harker—Hero*. We also understand—although it is

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not stated—the odd muddle of surprise, insult and pride experienced by the farmer who discovers overnight that he needs a wife.

Bingham's characters do not inhabit a deterministic universe: they are active agents in their own lives. This is energising to the reader in a way which is increasingly rare in twentieth-century fiction, where so often the philosophical undercurrent of a novel tells us that life is so completely outside one's control that it is hardly worth making an effort, that human beings are so irredeemably separate that all attempts at profound communication are bound to fail.

A pivotal experience of Bingham's life, and one which I would claim has given him a piercing insight into the human condition, is his time as a prisoner of war in Changi. It is clear that some very profound shaking of his own foundations occurred during that period. Bingham's conceptions of himself and others, his theology and world view underwent the kind of thoroughgoing reconsideration that only extraordinary circumstances are inclined to bring about. Somehow he manages to embody this in short stories of unforgettable literary power, rather than simply to pontificate about the experiences.

Ideas which come to life in the form of quirky, rounded and utterly human characters are what give Bingham's stories their depth, and their value for study. The stories are simultaneously simple and profound. They make narrative sense, they draw the reader into concern for characters and, at the same time, almost between the lines, they go a step further, into the 'whys and hows' of human existence which have kept philosophers busy for centuries. The philosophical undercurrents never swamp the narrative boat, for it is

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through the characters and their actions that the thinking is made immediate to us as readers.

The Boy in the Valley is a remarkable story. It explores the need of the adolescent to delineate himself from his parents, to weigh their philosophies and lifestyle while coming to his own. This journey towards an adult self is in many ways complicated for the central character by the deliberately chosen, well-thought-out, determinedly alternative way of life of his parents. He has a crisis of conscience as he tries to piece together what aspects of their world view really belong to him as well. Bingham writes of this dilemma with profound insight uncovering layers of thought and feeling hidden under his characters' words and actions.

The Wirril Creek stories included in this volume take us into a rural community where families have lived alongside each other for generations, where neighbours' quirks are known, but also their strengths of character, those qualities that shape them as individuals. There is an Arcadian simplicity about those stories. The characters are solid, reliable, dependable country people, a welcome change from the brittle, hard-nosed sophisticates and anonymous commuters of metropolitan fiction.

Why are these Wirril Creek stories so appealing, even to those too young to be nostalgic about the post war period? They seem to hold a mirror up to life, however far they may be in setting from our own lives. These quiet rural perseverers have unexpected depth and universality. Bingham's stories energise readers to get on with life in their small corner, but with an increased awareness of the aspirations and hopes which lie just beneath the surface of people met in the daily round.

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This new collection of stories from five decades is intended to function also as a 'sampler' or demonstration of the range of concerns and styles in Geoff Bingham's writing. Those who are engrossed by the Wirril Creek tales will find more of them in Bingham's *The Days and Dreams of Arcady* (NCPI, 1985). Readers who are challenged by the war stories would do well to read *Laughing Gunner: and Selected War Stories* (Troubadour, 1992). Taken as a whole, Bingham's war stories probe to the essence of human experiences, realising them in their true form, stripped of rationalisation, excuses and subterfuge. The enormity of human potential for good and evil resounds in these stories. They are clearly drawn from experience and yet are transformed into literary works of permanent value.

Hints are thrown out in a number of the short stories in this new volume, *Mr Hicken's Pears*, that Bingham's view of marriage is a rich and many-faceted, well-considered view. The interaction of each individual in a lifelong partnership is a theme he explores with both regretful realism and celebration in his award-winning novel *Tall Grow the Tallow-woods* (Troubadour, 1992). It is exceptionally rare to find a contemporary novel which is, in the end, positive and constructive on the value of maintaining integrity and openness through all the stages of a marriage.

In so much contemporary fiction the only certainty is that any marriage portrayed will be coming apart at the seams. Bingham's fiction reminds us that there are other kinds of marriages. In the same way that medical students study the anatomy of healthy human bodies, surely it makes sense to have novels which realistically explore the mystery and miracle of a lasting relationship, rather than simply recording stages to breakdown.

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It is evident that Bingham's eventful life and habit of reflection have led to the distillation of wisdom from experience. His literary style is flexible, wide-ranging, controlled and graceful. The smooth skilfulness of the narrative keeps the reader drawn in, intent on the characters' lives—the hallmark of a good storyteller.

Man's nature as God's creation is explored with unusual rigour in this author's work. No simple answers are given—or possible—but human connectedness with God is foundational to Bingham's view of the world.

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AMusA, BA(Hon) (Tas), MLitt (Oxon),
Bega, September 1995*

Mr Hicken's Pears

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

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

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

Often the locals would see him gazing down at this great heap of fallen fruit, shaking his head—sadly or happily they would not know, but shaking his head all the same—and talking, perhaps to the clumped, droning masses of bees taking sweetness from the old

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man's fruit. The locals hated to see all that fruit going to waste, rotting, as it were, on the ground.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why the flying foxes should not choose to attack the succulent pears of Mr Hicken had always been a problem unsolved to the folk of Wirril Creek. Pears are pears, wherever they are, and flying foxes are not

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given to whims and fancies, especially where pears are large and golden. There was some tale concerning Mr Hicken, who, in the days before his son Ralph went away to enlist, would stand every night on his back doorstep and swear at the flying animals. Much as this said for Mr Hicken's ability to swear, the tale is probably overrated.

Some had it that Mr Hicken would bang a gong, persistently, whilst others had it that he waved a golden lamp. Whatever he did, or did not do, the foxes, as far back as most could remember, had never landed on the magic pear tree.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nevertheless he nodded and said, 'Morning, Mr Hicken'.

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

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

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

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

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

'Cheap they are', said the small salesman. 'Bob the

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watermelons. Zack the squash and snapjacks. Peanuts bob a pound.'

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

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

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

The Hickey boy could see, as in a dream, his dray filled with pears, golden pears that heaped up high, that smelled sweetly beneath his nostrils, that tumbled from his dray, so many he had of them. He could even hear his own voice shouting, 'Pears! Good yellor pears! Mr Hicken's good yellor pears!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Hickey boy could see Ralph coming home: tall, thin, misty, a kitbag over his shoulder, a samurai sword at his side and, perhaps, like Sam Lonagan, with a few grass skirts for the girls to giggle over. He could see Ralph looking about for water and finding none and, disgusted, leaving the old man to mumble to his pears. No, that would be a bad thing. Also the Hickey boy was wanting his dray filled with pears.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Eh?' said Mr Hicken.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The boys nodded solemnly. 'You can irrigate, then', said the bullet-headed boy, 'like Sam Lonegan does'.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The dam was finished. The gurgling had stopped, swallowed up in the swelling volume of water. It almost terrified Mr Hicken, so much it was after so little.

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He shook his head so that his hair looped more than ever, and a few tears dripped to his feet.

'Wonderful', he said, 'wonderful!'.

'Not at all, Mr Hicken', said the Hickey boy. 'Only too pleased to do it for you.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The boys did not wait to be further urged. They drew their now empty cart under the magic tree and dropped the ripe fruit into it, Terry Hickey sitting up

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in the loaded branches and throwing the fruit down to the bullet-headed boy. Mr Hicken scarcely noticed them. He was staring down the paddock at the sheet of water growing before his eyes. He was shaking his head all the time.

When the boys were leaving, their dray filled to capacity as a dream that has come true, golden pears piled high and tumbling, he saw the melons, the peanuts and the squashes lying beneath the tree.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr Tracey Relaxes

Mr Tracey Relaxes

MR TRACEY believes he hears a singing, a high dreamy note of music, a gentle song, but he is not sure, for there is a scraping of wheels as a dray draws near, and he peers, does Mr Tracey, over his steel-rimmed spectacles, his eyebrows necessarily raising, and his astonishment showing mildly on his placid features.

We are coming, Mr Tracey.

We are coming with our vegies.

Oh, buy some, Mr Tracey,

If you will.

To be sure, it is young Terry, and he is seated high amongst pumpkin and squash, snapjacks and turnips, sweet corn and a bulging sack of peas. Mr Tracey finds it is necessary, still, to peer over his spectacles, but he is sure, now, of what he sees.

'Bless me', he says. 'If it isn't young Hickey.'

'That's right now, Mr Tracey', says Terry Hickey, brightly, approvingly, as though he was sure Mr Tracey wouldn't fail to recognise him.

'M'm', says Mr Tracey, gently.

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'We've got punkin, skwarsh, yellow pops, sweet corn, turnips and peas', says Terry Hickey.

'Plenty of them', says his friend, who is a small bullet-headed boy.

'M'm', says Mr Tracey, again. He peers at the pumpkins first, turns one over, taps it, frowns sternly and says, looking up at Terry, but from beneath his glasses now, 'That isn't a very good pumpkin, young Terry. It isn't ripe'. There is a certain amount of triumph contained in this last uttered statement. He repeats firmly, 'It isn't ripe'.

'Nuh', says Terry casually, 'some of them aren't. Not for keeping you know. Got to eat 'em now'.

'Ah, yes', murmurs Mr Tracey. He continues to explore. His hand caresses a turnip, his eyes also, but the turnips are all right, plump and white, and for that reason Mr Tracey seems even sterner. With triumph, however, he notices a faulty cob of sweet corn.

'Cutworms been at this!' he says. He holds the cob aloft, firmly grasped in his hand. 'Can't sell that, you know', he says.

'No, Mr Tracey', says Terry patiently. 'You can't. Not after the cutworms have been at it.'

'Unless', says Mr Tracey brightly, 'you sell it cheap'.

'Of course', says Terry Hickey, who knows a thing or two.

'Cheaply, hah, cheaply', says Mr Tracey, feeling much better. His mild but careful eye scrutinises the remaining produce. He snorts softly because all are unblemished, and when he is beginning to give up, in a sort of disgusted despair, he sees the pea-sack, chock-a-block, the peas filling out every corner of the hessian, and spilling prodigally on to the floor of the cart.

Mr Tracey Relaxes

The spilt peas seem excellent enough, but Mr Tracey, who also knows a thing or two, plunges his hand into the sack's green belly, and withdraws a handful of peas, and proceeds to examine them.

He gives a cry, the nearest, you might say, that Mr Tracey could come to a whoop. 'See', he says, drawing himself up so that he might shoulder, almost, against Terry. 'See', he points out. 'Brown, wet. Peas no good like that.'

Terry nods. 'Have to be eaten straight away, eh, Mr Tracey?' he says, and Mr Tracey does not seem to hear him, so concerned he is with the sweated peas.

'Mind you', he says to Terry after a while, looking down at the peas in a sort of judicial manner, but resolved, nevertheless, to be as fair as possible, having regard to all circumstances of the case, 'I think they would be all right if you cooked them immediately'.

'Cooked them immediately', repeats Terry absently. Reins in hand, he is staring at Mr Tracey's cauliflowers, as once he stared at Mr Hicken's good yellow pears. Mr Tracey's cauliflowers are, you might say, sort of showpieces.

It is not, mind you, that Mr Tracey never sells his cauliflowers; he does, but not to the Wirril Creek residents. He has larger irons in the fire than tinpot shows like Terry's Saturday-morning run. He sends to the city markets, always has, always will, if he has any thought to the matter. That is why Terry gazes wistfully at the green banners of the caulies.

'Now *my* peas, Terry', says Mr Tracey, 'they *are* peas'. He coughs, and adds apologetically, 'Or were, I should say'.

'My word, they were peas', says Terry enthusiastically. 'Now Mr Tracey, if you still had the peas you

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would sell to me, wouldn't you, now? I'd give you a good price, too.'

Mr Tracey becomes suspicious. He darts a look at Terry, but Terry has not changed much, so that he darts a look to the left, which is up the road, and a look to the right, which is down the road, and then he darts looks all about him, for he fears conspiracy is afoot, and about to tread upon his heels. He looks over his glasses, severely. 'Terry', he says in a firm voice. 'I've told you before, and I tell you again, that I will not sell to you. I can't imagine myself selling vegetables to a mere boy—not my vegetables.'

Terry shakes his head sadly. 'No, not your vegetables, Mr Tracey', he says slowly. 'I could never expect you to sell to me.' Steeped in sorrow and humility, he places himself well down the ladder in the scale of vegetable vendors, and with such self-deprecation that Mr Tracey eyes him sideways, a trifle suspiciously.

'H'm', he says, coughing. 'Well, I'm glad you see it that way, Terry.'

Terry, staring ahead, nods. He sees it that way, all right.

'Mind you, Terry', says Mr Tracey magnanimously, and in a spirit of explanation, 'when I say I grow vegetables, I mean I *grow* vegetables. That is to say I know what I am going to plant, what I am going to get, and where—when I harvest those vegetables—I shall send them. I can't afford to be—hah—er, tinpotting about, you might say, selling a bushel of peas here, and a lettuce there, and say a cauliflower, well, here'. He waves an arm about to indicate the general direction in which he is unable to do this or that sort of thing.

'M'm', says Terry, monosyllabic and gloomy.

Mr Tracey Relaxes

He knows, does Terry, that it is not only what Mr Tracey's vegetables look like—for they are fine vegetables to be seen—but it is what Mr Tracey's vegetables actually are. Mr Tracey knows how to grow things, so careful is he with his humus, so persistent with his compost heaps, so very, very exact with his mixture of farmyard manure.

It has been said of Mr Tracey that he keeps fowls only for the express purpose of collecting their droppings, but this is scarcely to be credited, as Mr Tracey is known to 'do a good thing' out of the sale of eggs, and the idea of Mr Tracey, waiting, as it were, near a perch, or within his fowlyard, for the birds to enlarge his manure pile, and therefore the quality of his vegetables, is an image far-fetched.

Nevertheless it is certain that Mr Tracey manures his gardens well, and that no lettuce leaves his vegetable patch but that it is large, crisp, succulent and sweet. Lettuces for kings are what Mr Tracey grows, and the same may be said of all his vegetables. Onions firm, well-rounded, rich in flavour. Cabbages hearted so that a finger will not sink in them, but which, when cooked, are as white as snow, and as melting. Cauliflowers? Ah yes, the cauliflowers—but they call for an essay on their own.

From where he is, seated high up in the dray, Terry sees the white hearts of Mr Tracey's cauliflowers, the creamy tumbling white hearts, with rills and waves and ripples of richness.

Terry Hickey shakes his head and thinks that it is a great pity Mr Tracey is firm in his marketing principles, and that it is a greater pity he will not assist Terry along the road to prosperity. Terry can see it, all right, the people thronging him for the vegetables

Mr Hicken's Pears

which they know come from Mr Tracey's garden, but that cannot be, and as for him thinking it *might* be, well, he can hear the folk of Wirril Creek talking about Mr Tracey and his vegetables.

'Him sell vegetables? Not him! Not old Mr Tracey. Oh, no, not that chap.'

Or, 'Well, he is a strange old boy. Never goes anywhere. Never sees anyone. All he does is grow vegetables'.

'Mind you, he does grow good vegetables.'

'Oh yes, he grows good vegetables all right.'

Mr Tracey, of course, grows good vegetables, but he never goes anywhere, or perhaps, more correctly, does not often go anywhere. There was the time, of course, when he did go into Coolbucca, and came home singing. That was about two years ago. Then he *was* a merry fellow, but it seems he has been more than repentant for that one brilliant lapse, and that he has given himself up, even more, to the growing of vegetables. Nevertheless his lapse has not been forgotten, and his determination to withdraw into his own shell has heightened contrasts and accentuated the memories of his merriness.

They say that Mr Tracey buttonholed the Mayor of Coolbucca, Clyde Reynolds, and said to him, 'I say, old fellow, what did *you* do in the war?'. And Mr Clyde Reynolds, at a loss to know which war he referred to, being too young for the First World War, and too busy to be at the Second, had shaken his head, saying he had done nothing if it came to that.

'Thought not! Thought not!' Mr Tracey had said delightedly. He had wagged a finger in the air, directed it eventually at Mr Clyde Reynolds, and had gone with a half-hop, and a half-skip, down the

Mr Tracey Relaxes

Coolbucca main street, and he had sung, happily, songs which showed he had been acquainted with the First World War, of such fine old vintage they were, and as he had ridden home in the bus, right back to Wirril Creek, he had continued singing merrily to himself. He had patted Ned, the bus driver, on the back, and said that he, Ned, was a fine fellow, and how well he drove, which he oughter've, of course, seeing what a fine lot of young fellows and young women he had on board, and—hah—if he were young, as—hah—he had once been, if there had been such a batch of—hah—young girls as there was this day, then he would have—hah . . . Whatever he would have was left to the imagination of all, for by this time Mr Tracey had disembarked and floundered to the road, his right hand grasping an untapped bottle, and his left waving benevolently at the young people who had so stirred his memory.

Everyone cheered at this warming sight of Mr Tracey, and he had raised his hand again, placed the other, bottle and all, about his waist front, and bowed, saying all the time, 'Quite so. Quite so'. After which he had retired to his vegetable farm, dancing and jigging up the clear, red road to his place, singing.

Now, however, if medals were to be handed out for two years of exemplary conduct, then the first would have to be hung upon the chest of Mr Tracey. For Terry Hickey, however, the remembered occasion brings a thoughtfulness to his eyes, and a certain amount of distant hope to his breast.

'Mr Tracey', he says suddenly. 'What did you do before you grew vegetables?'

Mr Hicken's Pears

Mr Tracey starts at the question, draws himself up, and takes a deep breath. He eyes the youngster shrewdly, but gives an answer, nevertheless.

'Well', he says modestly, 'I didn't always—hah—grow vegetables'.

Terry stares ahead. 'Of course not, Mr Tracey', he says, as though anyone would know that—anyone.

'H'm', says Mr Tracey. He nods. 'Quite so. Quite so', he agrees. 'I—er—hah!' Here he ceases speaking and fixes his eye, this time suspiciously, upon Terry. 'I—er—hah, wonder why you ask me that, young Terry?' he says.

'Well, I wasn't really interested', says Terry, 'not really. What I wondered about was whether you had ever been to war'.

'Been to war?' echoes Mr Tracey. He stares highly at Terry Hickey.

'Yes, been to war', says Terry's friend, surprisingly articulate. Hitherto he has crouched quietly amongst the vegetables, content to be as silent and harmless as they, but a spring has been touched, and Terry's friend cannot remain inarticulate, and rambles on.

'I know a cove', he says, 'that was in New Guinea. Got shot, he did, in both legs and both arms. Went to get a Jap, he did, and he got shot. None of the others got shot, though'.

Having imparted this information, he stares at Mr Tracey, and as Mr Tracey is about to speak he suddenly continues. 'He didn't get shot in no bones, he didn't. Got shot through the flesh. Didn't get no bones broke, he didn't, so he could hold his legs and run. He got that Jap, though.'

Again the small fellow ceases, draws in his breath, and huddles to a vegetable. Mr Tracey looks a trifle

Mr Tracey Relaxes

surprised, watches the small fellow for fear he may erupt again, looks over his glasses in the process and commences.

'Pooh', he says. 'You boys don't know what you are talking about.'

He looks impressively at the uninformed youths.

'No one does', he says airily, waving a hand in the air. 'No one.' He bows apologetically.

'Unless, of course', he says, 'it is someone who has been to the war'.

He nods and nods to show the truth of this statement cannot be denied.

'Mind you', he cautions them, 'no one who has been to the war would talk about it, not unless they could not—hah—refrain from talking'.

He gazes absently at Terry, whose blue eyes are clear and without guile, making Mr Tracey feel that this boy, if any, is entitled to know a bit about what happened, even if it was before he was born.

'Now in this war', he says, 'no doubt the men found things bad, hard. No doubt these little Japs were a tough bunch of nuts to crack. Not easy, you might say'.

Terry nods his head, the little fellow shivers acknowledgment, and Mr Tracey expands his chest and continues.

'Neither were the Huns', he announces surprisingly; surprisingly because he has never visualised himself holding out on matters of war to two youngsters, or, for that matter, anyone; but the ice has been broken and his reserve of many years has gone to the winds. All the surround of thoughtfulness and mental secrecy has been dispersed, and he plunges headlong into narrative and experience so that he

Mr Hicken's Pears

forgets, for the moment, that he is talking to two boys, or that he is talking at all, for that matter.

It is rather as though he is communing with himself, or even acting as a sort of commentator upon those strange years, now long past, but to his present mind near, so clear and factual they are in detail.

'Talk about being shot through the legs', he says. 'I remember a fellow who was shot through both legs, and got his bones broke—broken—too. There was no running away for him, of course. We had to go out and get him, pick him up from no man's land, with the shells about us, and some machine-gun fire too.'

The vegetable boy awakens and says, 'Gee!', which is accompanied by a long whistle of intaken breath, and Mr Tracey looks at him, nods, gulps a little and hurries on.

'Machine-gun fire', he explains. 'And none of us got hit. Got him in, too. Fine fellow. No complaints.'

Terry shakes his head as though he cannot believe it. 'Bet you got the MM for that', he says.

'MM?' says Mr Tracey. 'Oh no, you don't get the MM for that', he explains. 'Oh no, not that.' He laughs deprecatingly. 'Those things came down in the ration truck', he says, and laughs. 'Ha! Ha! In the ration truck.'

He sees the boys exchanging looks, and becomes serious.

'I did see fellows get decorations, mind you', he says. 'And they did deserve them, let me tell you.'

They let Mr Tracey tell them. They listen with real interest to all he has to say, and they nod, say a word here, and reckon, with intaking of breath, that it must

Mr Tracey Relaxes

have been terrific, and Mr Tracey, speaking at a rapid rate, nods and agrees, agrees and nods, and tells them, warningly, that it is not all they think it might be, but a man remembers all the best things, by Jove, and it wasn't—er—hah—a bad experience, but there you are. Yes, certainly, Terry, he has been to the war.

At the end of this Terry nods, as though he was quite convinced, all the time, that Mr Tracey must have been to the war, and the small vegetable boy comes to life and says, over and over again, 'Gee, Mister', in so awed a voice, and with so much genuine admiration, that Mr Tracey feels the trappings of his age fall from him, his grey hair is brown and crisped, his face is young and firm again, and he might easily march, as once he marched, to some of the fine old tunes.

He thinks, too, how bright he used to be in those days, and casts a sort of frown at himself for the old hermit he is now becoming, and how he is, altogether too much, living in himself. He looks about for some means of remedying these states of error, but can see none.

Terry, of course, being a wise young man, rouses himself, smiles cheerfully upon Mr Tracey, and says he must be going if he wishes to get his vegetables sold, but he will be back again, Mr Tracey can be sure of that. He waves goodbye to Mr Tracey and all his cauliflowers, urges the old mare into a semblance of life, so that the dray scrapes and whistles along the red road.

Mr Tracey watches them depart with some little dismay in his breast. He feels he must do something, that life now is altogether unsuitably geared to his present high momentum.

Mr Hicken's Pears

'Er—hah—Terry', he calls loudly. 'Stop that cart, boy! Er—hah—would you like some of my caulies to sell?'

Terry, for all his cunning, cannot contain his smiling, and Mr Tracey sees that this Terry has somehow brought him to a state of selling his caulies, and he might very well be angered, but he is not. He shakes a finger at the young rascal, laughs, and says, without peering over his spectacles, 'I believe you started me off talking like that, young Terry, so that you would get my caulies, eh? No, don't deny it! Isn't it so?'

Terry thinks it is best to be straightforward about it all, so he tells Mr Tracey he did want Mr Tracey's cauliflowers, because if he had Mr Tracey's caulies, or any of his vegetables, for that matter, then his sales would increase, and he would be able to compete with Joe O'Malley, who did the Thursday run, and in any case Joe O'Malley's vegetables were pretty poor, and if Mr Tracey thought his, Terry's, were poor, then he ought to see Joe O'Malley's.

'Quite so. Quite so', says Mr Tracey, and he is warmed to think his vegetables have such high repute, and he remembers his initial objection to selling vegetables to the Wirril Creek folk was because of their laughter at his pioneer vegetable-producing project, immediately following World War I. Very sensitive he had been then. However a new generation was growing, and it was to be doubted whether they should be penalised. If, then, they really think his vegetables are so good . . .

Aloud he says, 'Well, you haven't caught me, young Terry, because I'm going to let you have what you want, now, or at any time for that matter, providing of course you can give me a fair thing'.

Mr Tracey Relaxes

Terry is the young businessman, a little eager perhaps, but saying that he can give Mr Tracey just over the market price, which is good, really, seeing as how Mr Tracey will not have to pay agent's fees, freight, or even worry about bagging and boxing. Mr Tracey nods at all this, and smiles and says it is a great thing, and how many caulies will Terry want, and if he wants some *good* pumpkins, pumpkins that will keep, then he has some good hard Queensland Blues if he would like them.

Terry says he would like them, and he takes as many caulies as he can manage to heap into the dray, so that the small vegetable boy has to climb out of the vegetables, and sit up on the front seat with Terry, and the two make off down the road with the green plumes of cauliflower leaves swaying and nodding behind them, and Mr Tracey, looking down at his coins and nodding, and looking up at the boys and nodding, seems alert and satisfied, whilst Terry, triumphant amidst his spoils, thinks it is a very fine thing, which might never happen again, but anyway once is better than not at all, and a jolly sight better, indeed.

The Fish Redeeming

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One afternoon Mr Rankin, after tidying up the school and marking a trifle of homework, had

Mr Hickey's Pears

stepped from the ochrous department building and, about to put a long lean leg over his pushbike, noticed a boy padding along in the thick, red dust of the highway. The boy should long ago have been home, but, his head forward, his feet scuffing the warm stuff of the road, he was trudging merrily.

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

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

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

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

'With a worm', breathed Mr Rankin.

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

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

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

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

So fierce was the passion that it led him to extremes of extravagance. Normally a person who totted-up his petty expenses and made much of income, capital expenditure and the like—as though he relished sums out of school as well as in—he changed suddenly to making purchases of a reckless nature. For example, he bought long, shining, black waders—

The Fish Redeeming

these presumably for fishing—and a gleaming creation of a rod such as a fishing man dreams of, believing it to be his final reward in heaven. Other equipment, too: nylon lines, hooks of every shape and dimension, cunningly turned, and floats, and a creel which could never be even one-quarter filled, and a reel with every gadget upon it, and a thousand other things designed to entice and ensnare the agreeable fish.

Perhaps it was her husband's purchases which began the questioning of her Percy within Mrs Rankin's heart. Hitherto she had been blinded by his magnificence, his omnipotence, as it were, his ability to accomplish what he set out to do, his rare passion for tidiness, his fierce eye upon the wayward napkin, or the dead flowers in some half-forgotten vase; for Mrs Rankin had ever been her husband's best pupil. Now she noticed that his clear-headed outlook on buying had become somewhat fuzzy. She almost gasped as one fishing thing after another came into the house. And what she noticed, more than anything, was that never a fish did her hubby catch.

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

Yet the terrible truth was that the fish mocked him and all his grand equipment. Doubtless they had

Mr Hicken's Pears

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

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

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

Terry Hickey, cunning child, knew the weakness of his teacher, and he would forge the most incredible accounts of fishing. Perch of unbelievable size. How they had flown to the line of his father. How

The Fish Redeeming

Lash Thorgood had brought in a beauty of six pounds up at Brown's Wash.

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

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

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

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

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

Another sort of fisherman altogether was Mr Tracey. He had that quiet, confident approach appreciated by all decent fish. They recognised his merits and respected him for what he was, and every tussle was a clean issue in which the best won, usually Mr Tracey. He had long ago given up that feverish approach to the sport which marks out the greedy amateur. Hence he was able to appreciate the beauty of the night as he kept his long, silent vigil, and his thoughts were peaceful enough, his silence ruminative.

When, then, he heard a crashing along the banks of his favourite pools, and a heavy breathing, and even muttered cursings—and saw a fearful stab of light—he felt quite stirred to anger. He blessed

Mr Hicken's Pears

himself for having already caught five fine fish, and was about to rise and go when he, too, was caught in the glare of light. He could not go.

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

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

'Huh', said Mr Tracey without favour.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Fish Redeeming

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

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

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

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

'Oh', said Mr Tracey curiously.

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

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

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

Mr Hicken's Pears

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

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

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

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

'Just one moment, Rankin', he said.

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

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

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

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

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

The Fish Redeeming

'With that great, glaring light', said Mr Tracey, 'and all that noise and the like'. He peered at the schoolteacher. 'You don't even show respect for your fish', he cried. 'How can you expect to catch them, hey?' He added heavily, 'And with a worm!'

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

'Here', whispered Mr Tracey.

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

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

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

The two men sat there, each with his own thoughts, Mr Tracey trying not to feel proud, an evangelist of fishing, and yet, as he saw the line sink,

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so certain of what his craft must yield; and Mr Rankin, humbled now, with his almost accomplished crime for ever behind him and negated, watching the line moving in the water. His pulses were beginning to throb, heavily, and his heart, too, had begun hammering.

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

Private Amnig, VC

Private Amnig, VC

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

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

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

Come evening and the cool creeping down from the foothills, and Aaron will be awake, his emery wheel spitting a splurge of bright sparks; and Aaron will bend over it like a bow, sharpening this tool or

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that, making a nicety of a blunted chisel or chipped plane blade.

What Aaron thinks from time to time is difficult to say, for Aaron, at any time, seems a little dazed. How easy, then, to put it to the account of his many children, but such a jibe is cheap and too facile. Aaron, in his own way, is proud of his tribe, and will not countenance joking in the matter. Only once has he been known to ask for assistance, and that was in the matter of his income tax returns, when he was reassured by Mr Armstrong, the local postmaster, that he owed the Government nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Armstrong stares down at it, too. His eyelids quiver somewhat, his blue eyes clear and keen, whilst his lips keep moving as though they would voice a great piece of news.

'He's got the VC.'

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

'The VC?'

'Yea, the VC. Harold's got it for bravery.'

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

'The VC. That's the Victoria Cross, isn't it?'

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

Aaron says nothing. He stands in the sun, pondering the slip of paper; the words of the postmaster; and the son who has won this award. It all seems so much of a jumble to him, that he would prefer to be

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sleeping, or at least drowsing again in the sanctuary of his workshop.

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

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

'H'm.'

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

'To be the father of a VC!' He is still thinking in exclamations.

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

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

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

'Here.' He hands her the paper.

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

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

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

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

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

'They'll make him a corporal now', says Mrs Armstrong happily.

Aaron shakes his head. 'I don't think they'll do that—not now that the war's over.'

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

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

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

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

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

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'All seemed the same to me.'

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

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

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

Andy, the eldest, had got himself made a prisoner in Malaya, which, to Mr and Mrs Aaron's way of thinking—had they expressed themselves—was of little use. Ron and Gerald, the two younger than Andy, had seen action in the Middle East and then New Guinea. The remainder of the Amnig family were still at Wirril Creek, sprinkled about the district as helps on farms, or actually at the siding cottage, filling the bedrooms and spilling on to the verandahs.

A great flourish of trumpets is abroad in Wirril Creek and Rail, and throughout the entire Coolbucca Shire. War may have ended, but Wirril Creek has sprung into fame, since it has now been proved that from the local pastures and the low, cool hills may come as good as any in the world. There is plenty of talking about welcoming Harold home, and then it is

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no longer 'Harold', but 'Private Amnig, VC'; which, it is understood, is the correct manner of addressing your hero.

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

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

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

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

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

The 'Welcome Home', then, is complete, and the arrangements that have been made are many and exacting, all leading towards the one point and the same day. There have been public meetings, these resulting in committees and subcommittees, so that sports have been arranged, a kind of a gymkhana, food has been obtained, advertisements have appeared, as though word of mouth would not suffice in Wirril Creek, and the Coolbucca *Guardian* has printed reams about 'Our local boy, Private Amnig, VC'.

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

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

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

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

Before dark, as dusk hazes the blue hills, Aaron bestirs himself. He leaves his workshop—regretfully, perhaps—and makes his way to the house. He scrubs his face and hands vigorously, puts on a clean shirt and a tie with it. He brushes his greying hair, puts on his coat and hat and waits for Mrs Aaron. She

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emerges, fully and properly dressed for the occasion, since there shall be no 'letting down' of her Harold.

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

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

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

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

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

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blare of brass for the great deed the young man has done.

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

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

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

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and (here dropping his voice), the Empire, and the Allied Nations themselves.

It is to be thought, then, by the manner in which this statement is carried with acclamation, that the Allied Nations themselves are applauding, so deafening is the handclapping, and it is certain the nations of the world might little better them, and yet this is not the end of it all. A presentation is to be made, and soberly, quietly, bearing in mind the task which is his, the local member steps forward.

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

He hands an envelope to the boy.

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

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

The local member stands, raises a hand and says, 'The people of this district have made this gesture, raising the amount of five hundred pounds'—he must mouth this terrific sum, and all watching him

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savour the fame of it—'as a token, if insufficient, of their gratitude for what one soldier has done'.

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

He knows in a dismayed moment that wherever his son walks he will be known and remembered not as a man, but as a hero, as the winner of five hundred pounds. He wishes to stand up and stamp from the hall, but does not, because of his white-faced son up there and Mrs Aaron beside him. Instead he sits there, waiting for his son to speak, and Harold, when he does speak, talks in a low tone, little of which can be heard except the words 'I'm glad to be home', at which Mrs Aaron happily nods.

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

As they sit there, wondering what is the next step before they sing 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' and the National Anthem, the rector rises, and taking advantage of both silence and the warmly-developed social spirit says, 'I am sure we cannot let this day pass without some tribute to the parents of our hero. They are with us tonight, and we all know them: Mrs Amnig, who has cared all these years for her boys, and he who must feel the proudest man in Wirril

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Creek tonight, Mr Aaron Amnig, father of the VC winner'.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Place on the Left

EVERY time I go past the place on the left, I think of young Migley. Just before you come into Balhannah, back of the Adelaide Hills, you see the place on the left. We always called it 'the place on the left'. My wife Meg never ceased to be scandalised by it. 'It's nothing but a shack', she would say, 'and every other place being so nice too'. If you know Balhannah, you know she was right in what she said. Most of the houses were old, but very neat. Many of them were German, and all the better for that. They had a very tidy look.

Not the place on the left: it was always untidy. In a way it was like a junkyard or a disposals place, but then they never sold the junk. Not that they would have got much for it anyway. It was like a scar on the rich green countryside.

The cattle always looked calm on the undulating farms: the black and white of the Friesians always caught your eye. So did the aristocratic cut of the Scottish Ayrshires. I remember old Pullman—next to the Sensums—had the finest Ayrshires you would see outside Scotland. Not that a lot of them hadn't been imported from Scotland: they had. Our mouths

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used to go into a compressed 'Oh!' when we heard the prices he paid. But then the country itself was aristocratic—what with the old Germans and Scots, and some English too. Now, of course, they were all Australians, but they never forgot the dignity of their forebears. That is, with the exception of Migley's man, Tommy Sensum. He was a type all of his own, was Tommy.

Migley was all the way from Western Australia, from Albany in the South-West. Albany is quite a place too, if ever you have seen it. Its cool, green hills surrounding those multiple bays—they just get you in. I tell you that you never forget Albany once you have been there. If you have been born there, then it is always somewhat in your blood. Migley has eyes as deeply blue as the water around Albany. Her hair is that rich nutty brown with some dark movements in it. She is a looker, is Migley, or was—just as you take it.

Most people were amazed when Migley came to 'the place on the left'. She had such charm, and with the charm a lot of dignity. Yet in a way it wasn't just dignity. It was something of graciousness and humility wed together. People loved to talk to Migley. I think she was actually Church of England, but she used to come to the Methodist church on Sunday, and a few times she played the organ. I used to sit back and listen to that organ music, although, to tell the truth, my liking ran to something more than the bright hymns from Wesley's day. I liked the old German chorales, and many a time I made my way to the Lutheran church, and the folk there didn't seem to mind. I could almost dream when they sang their hymns of duty and dignity.

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But to get back to Migley. She came back with Tommy after he had been across to the West for a rare trip. Tommy never wasted a penny, and a holiday was a most uncommon thing for him. Maybe he knew it was written in the depths of the scroll for him. He just brought her back, and his relatives planned the rest. They worked and sewed and cooked and arranged until the wedding took place. They went into Adelaide for their honeymoon, part of it being spent at Victor Harbor. Few South Australian honeymooners have missed Victor Harbor. I imagine the place reminded her of Albany, being a bit less in scale, but beautiful all the same. They may have made it out to Second Valley or Back Valley or Normanville. I don't know, but I do know that the honeymoon meant a lot to her. She was misty-eyed for months—even years in fact.

Now that is the thing that puzzles me. How could she keep her respect for Tommy Sensum when he took her into such a dump? I give it to you that Tommy is quite a person. His forebears were Irish, and he had a lot of the joy and the blarney in his blood. But it may have been his love for the cattle which took hold of her. She also loved the cattle, coming as she did from the dairy country around Albany. She was used to the homesteads, of course, but then never anything as plain as Tommy's 'place on the left'. She must have been filled with loads of romance not to see the wretchedness of it all. Maybe Tommy kept her in good spirits all the time, chasing her around the old timber piles, romping through the collection of used trucks and cars, or leading her a dance through the rusting machinery plant. I don't know: I just don't know.

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Often I used to wonder how she felt when he carried her across the threshold of the old house. House! You had better be realistic and call it a shack, for shack it was. It was more like a humpy, but perhaps a little better. I had never seen it except from the outside, and so, for all I knew—in those first days of their marriage—it may have been quite comfortable inside. Moses Shannon, however, told me otherwise. He said the dining table actually had its legs into the dirt floor, and was composed of slats so that the crumbs fell through on to the floor, which was good for those huge Rhode Island Red poultry, and it didn't call for them to stand so much on the table. For all Moses knew, the old and worn couches may have been of cedar-wood frames, but if so they were very faded and the years had taken their toll. Moses said it was a real shocker, and he should know. He was the dairy inspector, and most of his troubles were on the Sensum farm.

The good thing about Tommy's farm was that it was large. It went over the hills where the red gums were, and some old stringy-barks, and even some of the old olives planted by the first settlers. I guess Migley could get away over those hills and forget the problems connected with their terrible shanty.

Yet the strange thing about the girl was that she seemed to thrive on it all. When they came to town—to Balhannah—Migley would go everywhere with Tommy, except of course to the pub. Ladies didn't go to pubs in those days, and certainly not in the Valley. There was a sort of decorum everyone kept, and the community seemed to be quite happy because of this. It was certain that Migley—Tommy called her 'Mig', and after a time we did also—would be at the sales,

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and Tommy appreciated her eye for a good cow, a young heifer or a budding bull. She was a help to Tommy, was Mig. There was an enormous lot of good-natured envy about. Some of the men would have given their eyeteeth for a beauty like her. They liked her commonsense intelligence also, but they were puzzled about her devotion to Tommy. Had they known what the word meant, they would have called it 'inordinate'.

I had my times when I talked to Migley. She was very easy to converse with: she was so fresh and enthusiastic, and she could talk cows until they came home. Mostly she talked about Tommy—what he was doing, the crops he was planning, the new Ayrshire bull they had gotten from the south coast of New South Wales. She could tell you a bit, too, about the milk yields, and certainly if they were as good as she said they were, then they were very good.

That was what puzzled me: how come Tommy could have such yields and seem to be so poor? I even talked to him about the matter. I said, 'Tommy, when are you going to put up your real house? When are you going to give young Mig a good home?'

Tommy was a bit astonished at first, I imagine. His eyes laughed a lot usually, but now they stopped laughing. They even went a bit hard. His look bored into me, and it was my turn to be surprised. 'It is our real home', he said, 'Mig's and mine. I've lived there all my life, and my Dad before me. I reckon it'll do us as good as it did them'.

I'm not the soft kind; not by a long score. I guess I must have had a deeper feeling for Mig than I had previously imagined. I was a bit shocked at my own

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inner indignation. 'That young Mig has been used to a fine sort of a house', I said, 'and you are just the man to give it to her'.

His look had not softened. 'Am I now?' he said slowly, and he was not sarcastic, only just even-voiced so that you did not know what he was thinking. He kept staring. 'What you say is very interesting.' He stopped talking and looked down at the ground, kicking it a little with his wellington boots. After a time he turned away, and I didn't know what to think. He walked away as though he was still thinking. Then he stopped in his tracks and turned to me. 'I reckon I can work out what is good for Mig, eh?' He turned again, on his heel, and strode off pretty quickly.

It was years later that I thought again about Mig and the house. If anything, it had further deteriorated. Maybe it hadn't. Maybe it was just that everyone now seemed so prosperous, and such lovely houses were being built in the postwar era. About the only advance Tommy made was to put in a new set of milking machines. Even then the milking shed was so primitive that the machines stood out like something grand in a place of poverty. Moses told me that the machines soon toned down and fitted in with the rest of the place. They looked old in no time.

'Really quite strange', Moses said. 'When I went on inspection, the engine would keep stopping, and all the cups would fall off the cows with quite a clatter. Tommy would feel around in the dark, looking for the spark plug. His engine used to shed the spark plug every so often.' He nodded apologetically. 'There are machines made like that', he said. 'They shed the spark plug when the pressure is too great.'

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Even now I am not sure whether Moses was having me on. I never asked about engines which shed spark plugs. Sounded a bit like a Jolliffe cartoon to me. Come to think of it, Tommy's set-up was a bit 'Jolliffe', but then it was not funny like Jolliffe.

Mig never thought it funny. She just thought it was wonderful. This was because she saw Tommy and her as being on a great adventure. They were trying to build up something which was pretty good, and build it up they would. She could just see what it would all be one day. For some reason or other she made me a bit of a confidant, possibly because I was an older man and was beginning to have grey hair.

'Tommy's got what it takes', she said. 'Things don't look much now, but you wait.' She gave me that warm, soft 'Mig' smile, and even I had to believe her.

It was just that something about Tommy himself left me uneasy. I couldn't see that it would work out. I thought, 'Mig must know something I don't'. This thought made me happy, especially for Mig's sake, so I left it at that.

I had the feeling that Mig was the best at choosing stock. She seemed to have it in her blood. Often, at a sale, she would dissuade Tommy about a young bull or a heifer. He didn't take it easily, but finally gave in, and they would make another purchase. Also she could persuade him to sell stock which he had thought to keep. She was quite charming in the way in which she dissuaded him, and very humble when she pointed out the weaknesses or deficiencies of an animal. Tommy saw the sense of it, and gave in. I think he was looking to use Mig's special intelligence.

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I remember when Tommy built his new milking shed. The whole thing was quite strange, really. By this time Mig and he had two children: young Ernie, and Mary Migley. Mary Mig was the living image of her mother and Ernie the dead spit of his father. There is no doubt that the parents doted over them quite a bit. Tommy always had Ernie down at the milking shed.

One day Tommy said suddenly to Mig, 'I reckon you deserve a holiday. I reckon you need to go back to Albany and see your people'.

Maybe Mig had always thought about going back there for a good stay. They had gone on occasions, but then only for a few days. In those times they had to cross the Nullarbor in their old FJ Holden, and the going was rough. That was when the dirt road had not been sealed. Still they had enjoyed it, and Mig saw it as an adventure. Tommy saw the holiday as having to get someone in to milk the cows. Now—this special time—he wanted her to go by rail, by the Transcontinental Express. Mig was certainly a bit excited, and agreed to take the two kids, but she was a bit puzzled. This was the first time she was allowed to go off without Tommy. It just wasn't quite in character with him. Even so she went, Tommy taking the three of them to Adelaide. They stayed overnight at the Grosvenor (which was a rare treat), did a little shopping the next day, and then they were off, over the 2,000 miles or more to Albany.

It was then that Tommy got stuck into his project—building the new bails. He didn't pull down the old ones—probably thinking of them as a good shed for other uses: I don't know. He built the new bails up behind the old house, and no man worked harder or

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quicker than Tommy. Of course he hired help—plenty of it. The plan for milking sheds is pretty regular, but Tommy had obviously thought out a new idea altogether. I won't go into it much, because these days similar bails-and-shed are fairly plentiful. But then Tommy's plan seemed like an innovation. To tell the truth, the building was remarkably functional. Tommy never lacked any marbles in that shrewd head of his.

Some of the fellows—the dairymen—came to have a look. They were amazed at Tommy spending such money on a milking shed, but when they saw the construction they went away pretty silent. Some of them looked at Tommy as though they had not seen him before. I mean, they suddenly seemed to see him as another man. I don't know what they were thinking, but I was a bit mad, which shows how much the idea of Migley had gotten into my brain, and even, I guess, my heart. Maybe you don't know why I was getting a bit mad, but the idea didn't appeal one little bit to me.

Tommy then had the top milking shed around that part of the country, even including the prosperous Barossa Valley. It was the talk of the district, but of course there was other talk too, which I will reveal when it comes to telling you about Mig's return with the two youngsters. Tommy seemed to show little excitement, but then it is hard to read the mind of a fellow like him. He went down and picked them up at Adelaide, but did so at a time when they would arrive at Balhannah in the dark.

Mig was glad to be back, her adoration of Tommy undimmed. She planned to be up early to get Tommy something to drink before the milking. She always

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had a cup of tea with him; she did so this morning. When the dawn broke, he took her up to the new bails. She was stunned when she saw them, and for a while remained quite silent.

'You like them, eh?' he asked. He didn't wait for the answer, but bundled her happily inside the building. When she saw everything—the disposition of the bails and stalls, the circular formation, the entrances and exits, and the clever arrangements for sluicing the bails, and washing up the buckets and utensils, she went as cold as ice. At first Tommy did not notice this, but then even he realised something was amiss. He waited for a comment but it did not come. Only her face went harder and harder, and Tommy had never seen Mig in this kind of mood.

Her first words were, 'You sent me to Albany to get me away, eh?'

He took her statement at face value and grinned. Then he nodded proudly. 'Wanted you and the kids away from all the noise and fuss', he said, 'so you could come back and see it finished'.

Her continuing silence after that alarmed him. He waited long enough and then burst out, 'Don't you like them?'

He noticed that her beautiful eyes were like steel, cold and set as blue ice. When she didn't speak, a tremor of fear passed through him, although he couldn't tell why. His puzzlement seemed to infuriate her. Then she spoke.

'Where's the new house?' she asked. 'Where's the beautiful new home for us all?'

Even with all that stiffness he thought it was the old Mig back to herself and joking. Mig wasn't joking. Mig was a million light years away from joking.

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She was just strongly, deeply and unremittingly angry.

'Maybe', she said, 'you have that further up the back, up on the ridge where I dreamed it would one day be?'

'On the ridge?' he said, suddenly wholly astonished. Then he muttered, 'The house! What house?'. Those were words he should never have said.

'You never even thought about a house, eh?' she shrilled.

Tommy had never heard Mig shrill. The high frequency stirred his nerves, but he made an attempt. 'What house, eh? Do you really mean we need a house . . . ?'

He didn't finish. She knew he was going to talk about the old shack as though it were perennial. No one needed a house when one had *that*. She had never dared to let herself believe that Tommy had an idea like that!

Mig was a person who was always one way or the other—wholly. Tommy didn't understand it when she was packing the old FJ. He looked at her, and at last asked her what she was doing. 'Packing to go', she said, 'and to go for ever'.

Even then Tommy did not comprehend. 'Go where?' he asked. She didn't answer, but she dressed Ernie and Mary Mig, and then got into the vehicle. That was when the whole matter broke in upon him. 'You mean', he said, 'that you are leaving me because I built a new milking shed and bails?'

She shook her head. 'Of course not', she said. 'Why should I? New bails are fine. We've needed a new milking shed, and the new yard just like you've made it, but we needed a new house before that. New

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furniture, too. In fact, new everything!' She banged the lid of the boot. You always had to bang the lid on their old FJ or it shook loose over the corrugations of the back roads. Mig settled herself into the front seat.

Tommy stood there helplessly, but her old adoration and mercy were gone. She was just a woman now, an enraged woman whom he would never pacify. He stared hard at her. 'You just can't do this to me', he told her.

The ice in her eyes never thawed a degree. 'You just see what I can do', she said, and loose gravel rolled under the sudden spurt as the acceleration came. He watched the old Holden bundle itself out of the farm, on to the main road, and bite its way towards Balhannah.

At first no one knew anything. Tommy Sensum was not the one to talk about his personal matters. I guess he had not sorted out the whole thing, anyway. I mean, it would take a long time for him to be able to believe she had gone because he had built the bails, or rather, that he had not built the house. Then rumours were born, and quickly began to grow. Tommy had had a row with his wife. Mig had taken the children to Adelaide and was living down there somewhere—over Modbury way—if you could believe the whole thing. It wasn't temporary. It was forever.

That was what set the tongues going. The old folk thought it a bit tough on Tommy. It made some sense, they thought, to get new bails. Take what the dairy inspector had said about the old bails—that they needed to be condemned. Not all the old wives agreed with the husbands, and some of the younger husbands said Tommy must be nuts to have done

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what he did. Tommy, for his part, seemed to withdraw more and more from folk and into himself.

That was when he came to talk to me. Somehow or another he trusted me, and he knew I had a high admiration for Mig, and that I liked the two kids. I was a bit dismayed when I saw him, because he was back to looking like he was before the marriage, untidy and careless. I had a pang of pity; I had thought Tommy deserved what he got, but his misery was too profound to let you stay in that frame of mind.

'Theo', he said to me, 'can you really see why she went?'

'Can't you?' I asked. 'Can't you see why she left you?'

He was a bit uneasy. 'Something to do with building the bails and not building a new house.'

I nodded. 'That's just about it', I agreed.

He still looked bewildered. 'But what's wrong with the old house?'

'What was wrong with the old bails?' I asked, and he was about to give a reply, but then remained silent.

I pitied him, but he had to know the truth. 'Whilst you were battling', I said, 'she adored you. She could take the old house and the old bails, but when you built the new shed before the new home, that just busted her. You must have been crazy not to think so'.

'I never thought she would ever leave me', he muttered.

'What kind of a place did she live in, in Albany?' I asked. 'Was her home a shack like yours?' He kept staring at me, and his eyes were tired. Finally

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comprehension began to dawn. I felt I had better help the comprehension a bit.

'She would have lived with you forever', I said, 'whilst you had to battle, but those new bails told her you didn't have to battle'. I stared at him for a few moments. 'Did she know you were cashed-up enough for new bails?'

The misery increased. His face was off-white. 'She knew nothing about the money side', he said. 'The Sensums have never told their women folk anything about their money.' His face was dead. 'Maybe I should have shared something of that.'

I came close, looked hard at him, until our eyes were meeting. 'How are you off, cashwise, Tommy?' I asked.

He flinched a bit. 'The Sensums have had plenty for years. Even through the Depression my old man was well off.' When he saw my surprise he shook his head with frustration. 'What am I going to do?' he asked. 'How can I get out of all this?'

'Build a new house', I said, 'and bigger and better than the bails'.

It was after that the rumours increased, but they had lots of reality to them: they were more than rumours. They were facts. Much of it came out of the things that Ted Browning the local solicitor had to tell Tommy. Then there was the matter of the children going to church schools, and the new home Mig had built out at Modbury. I guessed that was her angry compensation for what Tommy had never done. There was also the course Mig was doing at a College of Advanced Education, a special

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course in business management. Every week seemed to bring some strange fresh news, and the widening of the gap between them. Maybe the gap didn't really widen. Maybe—since the new bails—it had become as wide as it can be between a man and a woman.

I realised my estimate of Mig was quite wrong. I had thought she would have stood by him, quietly getting him to build a new house, but I can see now that if she had stayed then that would have been enough for Tommy. He wasn't going to break the traditions of three or four Sensum generations. He would never have built the new house. He would have remained stubborn amongst the old junk piles and in the old junk house. She would have known that. Half her anger was from knowing that.

There was anger in plenty, anger in Mig and anger in Tommy. You can't live in South Australia and not know everything that is happening elsewhere. People are pretty domestic on the whole, and so the tongues rattled. My, they certainly rattled! They rattled a whole lot more when Tommy began building his new house. What's more, he built it on the ridge. He had the very best contractor in the Valley to come in and build the house. Tommy himself was up and down to Adelaide to make sure it had the best of fittings. He also put in a fine garden and a swimming pool. He spared neither time nor money. He was just obsessed about that house, but of course it was obsession about Mig and the children.

Mig came nowhere near it. She never once travelled up the Balhannah road—at least, so far as we knew. What is more, we heard that she sold the old FJ and bought one of those sleek and tidy Jap cars.

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She was a pretty social type. We heard she earned her diploma, and was quite a bit in demand. She was her own boss; she didn't take much to men in her new life. When the house was finished, Tommy wrote and asked her to come to Balhannah, even if only to talk things over. Neither of them had tried to get a divorce. Mig didn't answer the letter. She may have tried, but if so, then she never succeeded.

I could go on with the story at great length, and tell you about the letters the two solicitors exchanged. Both Tommy and Mig were advised to see counsellors, but most of the counsellors themselves were divorced, so that didn't figure greatly in assuring them of any outcome. It looked as though the whole matter was finished, washed up, as they say. In fact, that was really the case. In the face of all this, it seemed a bit stupid of me to try to get them together. Even so, I tried.

I went to Modbury, and when she opened the door she was a bit startled. Then she seemed genuinely pleased to see me. 'Come in, Theo', she said. 'It's good to see you.'

The lounge room was very modern: everything was exquisite and just right. Somehow it didn't seem like Mig, but then Mig didn't seem like Mig. Apart from her flash of delight at seeing me, she was just not Mig. Something of her old self returned when the children came home from school. She rallied a bit of joy, but then it was gone.

'I believe you are just some businesswoman', I said.

Her face set a bit hard. 'Ah, yes', she said, but she was somewhat vague.

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'Ever likely to come up to the Valley on business?' I asked. She wasn't sure about that. Her business took her many places.

After that we talked about Albany and her parents. Albany was OK, she told me, but her parents really hadn't understood the business about the place on the left. 'Theo', she said, 'you understand, don't you?'

'Oh, yes', I told her, 'I understand all right. Tommy was just a fool. Just a plain stupid fool'. I could comprehend her disappointment and her anger, but I wasn't going to be supportive. I kept staring at her, wondering where the old Mig had gone.

'What kind of cattle do they have in Albany?' I asked her. I knew without asking, but I wanted to get into contact with her. She told me, and strangely enough at great length, as though it was good to talk about cattle.

'Tommy doesn't get the good cattle these days', I told her.

At first she wasn't interested, but then her curiosity got the better of her. 'What do you mean?' she asked.

I made out that I wasn't all that interested. 'The man seems to have lost his nerve', I said. 'He just doesn't pick them out like he used to. Same with his sales: he seems to sell the best, and that's no good for any man's herd.'

I saw the strong flicker of interest, and made out I had to leave. 'See you some more, Mig', I said. 'It's been great to see you.'

She eyed me with some suspicion, and then decided she would not let me go. 'You just sit down there, Theo', she said grimly. 'I want to hear all about the place and the cattle.' When she didn't include

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Tommy, I felt she was a bit too angry to admit she wanted to know about him, so I just let the matter ride.

I told you before that Mig is a remarkable person. I felt very close to her that day as a person. I kept cursing Tommy for a stupid fool, and wanting to bring the two together—not that Tommy would have minded—but she still had all her ice. She had had a long time to go over things, and that time hadn't helped.

Even so, she finally agreed after some time to come to Balhannah, or, rather, that I should have her stay at my place, and then we would go out together to the place on the left. Tommy Sensum was to know nothing about this, and what is more she wouldn't bring the kids. Both solicitors would be pretty cool to the idea of her going near the farm, anyway.

I'm not going to bore you with the small thought and small talk that brought about Mig's visit to the old farm. It was late afternoon when we got there, and Tommy was milking. There was a young fellow helping those days. Tommy seemed to be shocked to see Mig, and I could see him fighting to keep cool. None of her ice had melted, and I think this was mainly what shocked him. He had only ever spoken to Mig in one way, and this very calm, sophisticated and brittle woman was someone he didn't know. To his credit, he handled it all pretty well. They talked the sort of talk you indulge in in front of others, and it seemed that was fair enough for Mig, but not for Tommy. I could see the fire behind his eyes, and tell by his colour and his breathing that he was a mixture of anger and suffering.

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When the milking was over, we went to the old house. It was her turn now for anger and suffering. Her gaze swept around the living room with all its untidiness. Far from softening her, she became like granite. I have to confess that often I find human emotional tempests a bit unreal. I had to conceal my habitual ironic humour which was just below the surface. At the same time, I genuinely felt for them both. Neither was happy, and both were in collision.

She said, 'You don't keep it very tidy'.

He said, 'What's the point? This will all be over soon'.

She stared at him. 'What do you mean "over"?' she asked.

'Well', he said, 'there's the new house'.

She kept staring. 'What do you mean "new house"?'

Tommy said nothing, but I could see his anger rising.

'The place on the ridge', I said. 'You must have seen it.'

She had seen nothing. We took her to a window and she looked up the ridge. Her face was like scarlet. She said nothing as we went through the rear door. The place was not all that easy to be seen, because some of the old olive trees helped to obscure it, and there were new native shrubs which Tommy had planted. They were beginning to flourish.

When she saw the lawns and gardens, and the crazy paving up to the front door, she obviously could not believe it.

No smile came to her face. She walked on, hard as ever. We walked up the steps and Tommy opened the door. We went inside. She went through room

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after room. It was all done in silence. There was no furniture in the place, except for things such as the electric stove, the refrigerator and the custom-built sinks, cupboards and the like. The bathrooms were equipped, and one of them was ensuite with the main bedroom. She stood there, not knowing what to say.

Then she did talk. A lot of the anger was still there, but she asked in a guarded voice, 'Who designed all this? Who worked it out?'

'I did', said Tommy. 'I did it with the contractor.'

'It must have cost a mint', she said.

Tommy shrugged his shoulders. 'Not all that much; not a lot to worry about.'

'Tommy Sensum', she said, 'you're a fool'. There was no change in her voice, just the same anger and indifference.

'Is that so', Tommy said. 'And what makes you think that?'

For a time she said nothing. Then she asked, 'Why did you build this? For someone else, or just for you?'

Sensum was stubborn as a mule, obstinate as all the Sensums before him. 'For you', he said shortly, 'who else?'

That was when I thought I saw some hope. Tommy didn't; Mig didn't; but I did. I noticed the faintest of alteration in their voices, just enough to give delicate grounds for hope.

She said, 'Did you think I would ever come back?'

He said, 'Of course: why not?'

Then she blazed away. She called him every kind of fool. She told him he was a disaster. She used her old Albany-bred ability to face any man and not be cowed. She used her new brittleness, born of her recent tertiary training and all the feminist jargon she

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had amassed. She let him have it, full on. When she finished I thought she had blown everything, in fact blown it sky-high. Tommy just kept looking at her steadily.

'So you'll come back', he said quietly. I thought she would rocket him the second time, but she didn't. She kept staring back at him, a mixture of frustration and unbelief.

'You really do think I will come back', she said. 'You do, don't you?'

He nodded a bit. 'Could be', he said defensively.

She went to the front windows of the long living room. She looked down at the old house of the place on the left. She pointed at it with great derision. 'And what will you do with that?' she asked.

He seemed a trifle surprised. Then he said, 'Keep it, of course. It is the old family place'.

I saw the anger well up. 'You and the old family place!' she said, and out poured another torrent of words. 'Tommy Sensum, you deceived me. You married me as though you had nothing but the farm, and the cattle, and that old shack. All the time you had money and plenty of it. Plenty to build new bails, and plenty to build this house, and you never said anything. I had to use the money that they sent from Albany to build my place at Modbury and to help to get me through college, whilst all the time you sit on hundreds of thousands of dollars.'

His surprise seemed genuine. 'Money?' he said. 'I thought you never cared for it.'

She looked at him, bewildered. 'Do you mean that? Do you really mean that?'

He nodded. 'Well, of course. The Sensums never even considered it. They just kept thinking, "It's been

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good enough for Dad and Mum, and it is good enough for us".'

That was when she went pale. In fact I saw the tears start to her eyes. 'Didn't you know', she said, 'that I stuck with you, through thick and thin; that I loved the old place because I thought that was all we could afford, and I had dreams that one day we would have a new house, and later on new bails, a good milking shed—and I slaved to help you get it? Also I wanted you to have good stock. Oh, I worked hard all right, but then all the time the money was there to do anything and everything. Oh my God!'

He stared stonily at her. 'You just never said anything. You seemed like the Sensums, happy with everything and anything. I just thought the way you loved me that we were going well. I thought you would like the bails. I just didn't know you wanted a house.'

I have never seen a human being so bankrupt for words or emotions as Mig was at that moment. I guess I have never seen anyone suffer like that. I wanted to comfort her, but it wasn't the sort of time you do that. I just stood and watched them clash with eyes like swords crossed.

Suddenly everything seemed to be neutral. Tommy was looking at her with wonder, but she was staring through the window, down at the old house. A thought struck her, and a question. 'What are you going to do with the old place?' she asked.

I saw the old fire leap into his face, into his eyes. 'Keep it, of course', he said. 'It can be quite valuable.'

That was what unhung her. She turned on him with blazing eyes. 'Well, you can keep your old place, and your new one', she said. 'Up with the Sensums!'

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Up with tradition! Up with good sturdy old manhood! Keep both places, and keep them for ever.'

I was grinning, but only inside. He wasn't grinning. A huge towering rage was building up. 'So you won't come back unless I get rid of the old house, eh?' he shouted.

She nodded, and was silent. He looked at her. 'So that's about the shape of it, eh? So you'll tell me what to do, eh?' She nodded again. He rushed towards her and stopped short of her, but only about a foot. 'Is that your last word, hey?' he shouted.

She nodded. 'It just tells me where you are', she said, and I was a bit shocked. Something close to mildness was in her voice

His eyes blazed and he rushed towards the vestibule. Then he was out of the house. He was running towards the old implement shed, whose shingles had almost entirely been shed over a century or so. I saw him climb up on the old front-end loader with backhoe. He gave a couple of angry kicks, and the great dinosaur of a thing lurched forward. She appeared a bit alarmed, and looked askance at my grin.

'This should be good', I said. She came over and stood next to me. It felt good, Mig by my side, while Tommy was lurching with his great machine towards the old house. I thought about the past, and all the reminders of it: the old furniture, and even the crockery and things that had been in the family for generations. Then I saw him raise the front-end loader a bit, whilst the backhoe was lifted like a scorpion's sting. It was at that point he went belting into the old building.

You could hear the crash, and the splitting and the rending. You could see the dust too, and the

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crumpling corrugated iron, rusty and askew, and the old slabs falling like shattered limbs and twisted members.

What Tommy was shouting I never heard, but he did seem a bit like a knight of old, not fighting a dragon, but mounted on it. The tractor itself was roaring as though mad, and each time it charged it was revved to the heavens.

Then Mig broke away from me. I marvelled at the speed she got down those steps, and then forward to the old building and the crazed Tommy and his bulldozer. She was screaming something above all the noise, but he was waving his arms like a madman, and shouting his own words.

It was quite a dialogue, a screaming backwards and forwards of a man and a wife. Maybe Mig was trying to save some of the precious things, and maybe Tommy thought nothing was too precious to destroy, to get back the incomparable Mig. I just don't know. I was watching them with amazement and joy and incredible hilarity. Indeed I was weeping—with joy of course, great huge joy—and my arms were going up and down with colossal happiness. I wanted to get down to them and be part of it, but then I knew that just wasn't my privilege. The stupid old bulldozer was standing where Sensums had stood for decades, and its engine was roaring, but that made no difference to them as Tommy clambered down and Mig rushed into his arms, and the whole world went crazy in the face of the two and their indefatigable love. I can't find another word to describe it, but it is a good word, and why should I be ashamed of it? And why shouldn't I make a story of it?

Need a Wife

BERTIE Curtis was very thoughtful following the visit of the dairy inspector. In his own quiet way he had secretly dreaded the coming of the official, and because he habitually prayed to God about the most intimate details of his day's work, he had often prayed about the inspector, petitioning God to give him at least some warning about that man's coming.

Take the bails, for example; Bertie had promised himself that, being warned by God regarding the inspector's visit, he would immediately haul down, bag by bag, the ton of pollard and linseed meal stacked in the fourth bail. Then he would remove the feed-drums from the third bail, and the surplus of feed-sacks he was reserving for the wheat season when bags were at a premium. It would take some doing, but Bertie had promised himself he would manage it, even if it meant later re-stacking the feed in its rightful bail, the drums and feed-sacks in theirs.

But the inspector had come, with no warning except that his small roadster had pulled up outside, and he had uncurled himself from the driving seat, unfolded himself from behind the wheel. True, he had waited a moment to stretch, to reach his lank

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form towards the sky, after which he had advanced purposefully towards the Curtis house. Bertie, being a bachelor, had his house no tidier than the bails. To tell the truth, Bertie had feed stacked in the house too, his father's old room taking most of it, with the daily ration for the pigs in the storeroom, as well the pigs knew.

So it was Mr Kissop found Bertie, petrified almost, amongst his feed.

'Ah there, Mr Curtis', he said heartily, knowing for sure that he had the law on his side, and undoubtedly, on the other side, a law-breaker. 'Nice day, isn't it?'

'Lovely', Bertie told him earnestly. If Bertie had been able to roll his eyes, they would have rolled with apprehension.

Ted Kissop rubbed his hands together. Long, capable hands they were, the hallmark of character, as Bertie acutely observed. 'Just thought we'd pop down and look things over', said Mr Kissop, using a rather jovial royal plural.

'Ha', said Bertie, trying to enter into the inspector's delight. 'Yes, of course, ha!'

'H'm', said Mr Kissop absently. He loved the trips around to the farms. He had a great respect for cow cockies and their acumen, though rather less for their cleanliness. But what pleased him most was the sheer delight of travelling, at the Government's expense, along endless stretches of road, turning into nooks and crannies of farm life, and being at no disadvantage, either.

'Things are a bit anyhow', said Bertie slowly. Then, with a rush, 'What with the rain you know, and one thing and another'.

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'Ah, yes', said Mr Kissop kindly, as though this were the first time he had heard such a thing, and because of that it contained something interesting. 'Certainly has been wet, Mr Curtis.'

'Besides', Bertie told him eagerly, 'I've just had twins'.

Mr Kissop seemed to see nothing surprising in this, but he was delighted. 'Different sexes, Mr Curtis?'

'Two heifers', said Bertie proudly.

'Fine', said Mr Kissop. 'I can't remember many cases of the same sex. You're a lucky man.'

Bertie stared at the ground. Then he said, without much enthusiasm, 'Well, I suppose you'll be wanting to see the bails and dairy'.

'Ah, yes', said Mr Kissop, as though that suggestion was a surprising one.

'If you'd like a cup of tea . . .', suggested Bertie.

'A cup of tea', repeated the inspector, and Bertie's hopes rose a trifle. He regretted, mildly, and for the first time, that he was a teetotaller. Probably Mr Kissop, being a jovial man, was not.

Ted Kissop's eyebrows shot upwards as he entered the kitchen. There were fifteen cats inhabiting the chairs, the table and various half-empty sacks of feed. Bertie, noting the surprise, hastened to explain.

'I keep that feed for the fowls', he said proudly. 'That bag there's for the black chooks, and that over there for the Rhode Islands, and the other for the Leghorns. Keep a check on what they eat, and so I know my profits.'

'Ah', said the inspector doubtfully. 'A man with a system, eh, Mr Curtis?'

Need a Wife

'In here', said Bertie, taking him into the storeroom, 'are the bags for the pigs. They have a bag each'.

'But you don't feed them in here!' said Mr Kissop, shocked.

'Oh, no', said Bertie, 'not on your life. But they try to get in, the little coots. I've caught 'em more than once at the wrong bags'.

Mr Kissop allowed his gaze to fall lightly upon the fowls, of varied colours, pecking their way along the hallway. Bertie sighted them also, and divining that this was no place for fowls—or not today, anyway—rushed at them, spreading his arms. 'Sh-hoo!' he said, his voice cracking as he endeavoured, vainly, to register indignation.

It was at this point Mr Kissop declined tea. No, he was firm about it. There were other farms to be seen, as Bertie well knew. Bertie later considered that it was at this point he had lost any advantage he might have had over the tall inspector.

Mr Kissop shook his head slowly when he surveyed the feed in the fourth bail. He pointed that out to Bertie, who quickly countered the suggestion with his fifteen cats 'and some to come'. Mr Kissop nodded doubtfully, and proceeded to the third bail, where he peered into feed-drums. He shook his head even more doubtfully. At the second bail he almost wept. There was a litter of machine parts, tools, grease and oil. 'I see', he observed sadly, 'that you use only one bail, Mr Curtis'.

'Only one', said Bertie, brightening. 'They know just when they've got to come in, Inspector, and come in they do. Saves a lot of time.' Bertie shook his head and said, 'I don't know why some go to all the trouble of bailing them up in different bails'.

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Mr Kissop continued to look sad. 'No, I suppose you don't, Mr Curtis', was all he said.

It was true that the yards were spotlessly clean, cobbled and without manure. Bertie's large vegetable garden received its portion daily, and so Mr Kissop was able to breathe freely on that score. But the dairy itself cancelled those few good marks. It was littered, too, with harness and pieces of metal scrap, worn-out horseshoes, rusty cans and—the gods forgive Mr Curtis—drums of sour skim! Mr Kissop had ceased shaking his head. He was numbed, it seemed, and now expected anything.

'Those pigs you have, Mr Curtis', he said suddenly, 'where are they?'

'Oh, way out there', said Bertie, pointing towards the furthest reaches of his farm.

'Ah', said Mr Kissop. He seemed to breathe more freely.

Then it was he said the amazing words, the sentence which, then and when he had departed, burned and continued to burn deeply into the mind of the bachelor dairyman.

'What you need, Mr Curtis', he had said, 'is to get yourself a wife'.

Bertie had looked at him in amazement. He had not thought to protest, to question indignantly, to do other than look horrified. 'A wife'd fix everything for you', the inspector had added knowingly.

Only one comfort remained to him, and it was that the inspector had let him off with a warning.

'You'd better start cleaning things up, Mr Curtis', he had said. Then his gaze had dropped to the ground as he sighted something familiar.

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'The pigs aren't always out there, are they?' he asked.

Bertie, because he was too stunned for words, too dumbfounded, and because, anyway, the evidence was against him, could only shake his head in miserable acquiescence.

The truth was that Mr Curtis was afraid. He had thought about Ted Kissop's suggestion, and there was no way of getting around it. More, he found the thought of marriage was not at all repugnant. He could not even hate the thought of a woman in his house. It actually appealed to him.

Yet, also, he was alarmed for his freedom, the carelessness of doing just as he liked, when he liked. To come in when he wished and make a cup of tea, to forget a meal now and then, to jump into the truck and go down to the sales, and, when the sales were finished, to stay seated upon the rails and discuss cows, crops and the infamy of the Government. So Bertie shook his head, and tried to think badly of Mr Kissop, who had thrown a bomb of confusion into his life.

Much in this frame of mind, Mr Curtis wandered towards the southern boundary of his farm. The impulse was unconscious, but it was undoubtedly a longing for company. There, where his property converged upon the road and railway line, was the Amnig house tucked into that last small triangle, and fenced around with palings. Aaron Amnig, his wife and eighteen children lived in that house, and many were the times Bertie had shaken his head in wonderment. Now his slow progression towards that mass of humanity must have been brought on by

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a loneliness hitherto unnoticed by him, but lately so callously revealed by the inspector.

Aaron's forge was burning, for a thin wisp of blue smoke ascended into the early evening. From the kitchen chimney spiralled a thicker plume of smoke. The Amnig meal—no mean affair—was in course of preparation. Mr Curtis shook his head sadly. He longed for the warmth of a fireside. For himself, he was heartily weary of sausages, boiled, fried or poached eggs, and even more tired of the preparation it entailed, the cleaning up so often required.

Perhaps because the evening had a slight chill to it already, the Amnig children were not to be seen; that was, apart from Dora. She sat, her well-shaped legs dangling over the palings fronting the railway lines. When she saw Bertie Curtis she waved carelessly.

'If you're looking for your red bull, Bertie', she said, 'he's over in them turpentines'.

'Ah', said Bertie, 'in the turpentines, is he?'. He felt strangely uncomfortable in the presence of Dora and for the first time he noticed her eyes were brown; large too, and that they gleamed as they observed him. Her cheeks were red, perhaps from the cold, but her nose was unblemished, firm and smooth, and slightly upturned, so that it might have been called pert. Mr Curtis found himself screwing about to catch a glimpse of that little beauty. Within, he was vaguely alarmed.

But Miss Amnig saw nothing wrong in her neighbour Bertie.

'What do you sit here for?' Bertie asked suddenly.

'Oh, nothing', said Miss Amnig, and her nose, if possible, tilted higher. It was no concern of Bertie's if

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she wished to watch the fettleers on their way home. She loved the prattling rattle of their trikes, and the rhythmic rise and fall of the handles, and even more the carelessness of the men as they passed. A wave or a nod, and sometimes a bold stare, something she was always able to match.

Then, last week, Harry Crowther had promised her a pair of pigeons, a pigeon pair.

'I'm getting a pair of pigeons', she said suddenly.

'Pigeons', said Bertie. For some unknown reason his heart contracted. He hated and loved the sensation. It was new. His farm and all its importance suddenly shrank also, dwindled to nothingness beside the richness of the girl on the fence. He noticed, with downcast eyes, that she was well formed, matured, capable, and certainly a good worker.

'Fantails', said Miss Amnig, and her eyes became dreamy. It was not that she liked fantails a great deal, nor that she was madly in love with Harry Crowther—not yet, anyway—but she knew the sight of two white fantails would tear at her defences, and, before she knew what was happening, Harry would be taking her to dances and things.

Bertie desired to ask where the pigeons were coming from, but at that moment the trikes came into view, and Miss Amnig became demure, her eyes gently upon the machines as they neared, her chin cupped into her hands.

They were come, they were gone, and in that time much had happened. The men had shouted 'Hi there, Dora. Ho there, Bertie!' and had whizzed past. One young fellow had shouted, 'Half your luck, Bertie!' and there had been a roar from the others.

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When they had gone, Dora's cheeks were aflame. 'Well, of all their hide!' she said. She stared at Bertie, and as she stared the crimson mounted. 'They reckoned you were doing a line with me', she said indignantly.

Bertie nodded. The experience had pleased him. 'Wait till I get that Harry Crowther', she said, her capable jaws clenching.

'Harry was giving you the pigeons, eh?' asked Bertie.

Dora seemed unable to speak. Then she said, 'That's what he thinks'.

'Ah, yes', said Bertie.

Suddenly Dora said, 'It's getting late now, Bertie. You'll be going back for your tea, eh, now that you've found the bull?'.

'Now I've found the bull', said Bertie, and his voice sounded sad.

'Well, I reckon', said Miss Amnig confidentially, 'that you ought to stay for tea. One more won't make much difference'.

'No, I suppose not', said Bertie, scarcely realising what he was saying.

But throughout the meal Mr Curtis said very little. He seemed to be pondering something, and all who knew Bertie knew also that he was a man with one thought at a time. A fact which had not gone unnoticed by Mr Kissop, who for all his busyness and desire for cleanliness, was no man's fool.

Next morning, Dora sat on the fence as was her custom, and the following evening also, but it was not to wave to Harry Crowther. She gave him a cold stare, much to that young man's amusement.

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'I'd hate to be hitched to that dame', he told his fellow fettlers when they were well out of hearing range. One had to shout to be heard above the noise of the trikes.

'Got some go in her all right', someone agreed.

'Like 'em with go in 'em', said another.

'I'm young yet', said Harry Crowther.

And Mr Curtis had not cared to search out his bull, although each evening it gathered the heifers into the turpentine clumps. No, Dora had seen Bertie pile his utility with empty feed sacks and sail away merrily towards Coolbuca. It had not pleased her much. It was as though she had met Bertie for the first time, and in some way she wished to get her own back for the embarrassment to which he had subjected her before the fettlers. Of course it was all his fault. Bertie Curtis, indeed! She often stared across to his farm, wondering about the house and how he lived, and whatever that man did on his own.

Sunday morning it was when Bertie came, ostensibly looking for his bull. It was a bright Bertie this morning, and a calm one.

'Hi there, Dora', he said.

Dora glanced around to see whether or not she was noticed by any of the family. She was, but she dropped from the fence and advanced on Mr Curtis. 'Now look here, Bertie Curtis', she said.

'Thought you might like to have a look at my place', he told her. 'Never been there, have you?'

'Well, what do you know about that?' she demanded.

Bertie grinned. 'I've got something to show you', he said. 'It won't take you a minute.'

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Dora stared at Bertie as though this were a new Bertie she was seeing. But it was the same old Bertie, a trifle less shy, a trifle cleaner in his clothes, but as stolid and determined as ever. 'Don't suppose it can hurt', she said airily. 'And you can't eat me', she added haughtily.

'I've cleaned the dairy up something wonderful', Bertie told her as they tramped across the pasture. 'Ted Kissop was out the other day and he went me hot.'

Proudly he showed her the bails. True, the feed was still there, but with fifteen cats there was still a counter to any objection by the inspector. It was the third and also the second bails which were pleasing. Spotless they were, but Dora saw in them only three clean bails, and the shining chromium of new milking machines. 'They'll cut down the work, Bertie', she said.

Bertie's face fell. 'Don't you think it's clean?' he asked.

'Oh yes', she said uncaringly. There was faint dismay in her neighbour's face. 'Got a nice place here', she said with slight envy.

'Like it, eh?' said Bertie, and he began rubbing his hands.

When they passed the house, Miss Amnig put her upturned nose into the hallway. Then she trod the two steps, stood in the hall and peered into the kitchen. When she stepped back, her eyes were filled with horror. She stood on the top step, her arms akimbo and indignation personified.

'Don't you tell me, Bertie Curtis', she said, 'that you live in all that mess!'

'Mess!' said Bertie, equally indignant.

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'I've a good mind . . .', said Miss Amnig. With that, she began shooing the fowls from the hallway, after which she advanced on the kitchen, followed by a dismayed Bertie.

'Go on', she told him, 'get that stuff into the barn'.

'Now don't you go getting those bags mixed up', said Bertie, alarmed. 'I won't know what returns I'm getting from the chooks.'

'Chooks!' said Miss Amnig in disgust. 'Chooks. I like that!'

A quarter of an hour later the profits of the pigs were also mixed and the cats had fled to the barn. Bertie was lighting a match, igniting ancient history in the form of years-old newspapers. He should have been furious, but as the flames leapt from the paper, so did an intense delight flourish within, and along with it a fear also, fear of liberty curtailed, if not wholly abolished.

Finally, when the house was swept and garnished, and the seven devils of loneliness, the cats and the fowls cleaned from it, Dora stood on the back steps and brushed her hands. She glared warningly at Bertie.

'Don't you ever let me catch you with the place like that again', she said.

Bertie was looking at her and thinking. With her, Ted Kissop would never catch him on the hop. Better a smart woman than many indolent prayers to the Almighty.

'I was going to show you the orchard', he said mildly.

'Ah, yes', said Dora with faint enthusiasm.

Before they even reached the orchard Dora became aware of the birds fluttering and cooing above

the enormous apple tree which centred the orchard. Coming closer they could see them more clearly. White pigeons, and every one of them fantails. Dora stared at them in amazement.

'White fantails!' she said. She looked at them with unfeigned delight, her small nose upturned in pleasure. Her look of motherly indignation had departed. She was the Amnig girl again. 'Gee, they're lovely, Bertie', she said.

'And Harry Crowther won't be able to buy none, either', said Bertie triumphantly. 'I bought the lot. Every white fantail in Coolbucca I got.'

'Bertie!' said Dora in amazement. Then the colour began to seep upwards from the neckline of her dress.

'Bertie Curtis!' she said the second time.

But Bertie said nothing. Then Dora caught sight of the pigeon-cote. 'Where did you get that?' she asked.

'Made it', said Bertie, pleased at the question.

'You did?' she said unbelievably. A light was dawning in her eyes.

Bertie nodded. Dora shook her head wonderingly. 'I reckon that's real good', she said admiringly.

Then she stiffened. 'They'll dirty all the apples when they come on', she said with slight indignation. 'You can't leave that there.'

'That's right', agreed Bertie, bewildered. 'You're right, Dora. Where'll we put it?'

Dora scarcely seemed to notice the change from the personal singular to the very personal plural.

'We'd better put it right over in the corner there, farthest from the house, Bert', she said.

'So we better', said Bert admiringly, already taking it for granted.

Happy Harker—Hero

THE HOUSE leaned away from the hill at a bleak angle. The moon caught the corner jutting to a dark sky, and stayed there as though frozen into immobility. A fir tree showed a fronded tip over the edge of the gable that was the house.

The little man in the dark coat kept out of the moon's light. Close to the walls of the building he kept, seeming to love the darkness rather than the light. Then he clambered up on to a verandah which was on the darker side of the house. He paused for a moment, breaking a latch, and in another moment was through the window into a room.

It seemed to be the place he wanted, for he laid down a burden of tools on the floor. When he flashed his torch, the gladstone bag he had placed on the floor became a grotesque shadow which grew and withdrew at each motion of the moving light. In the corner was a safe. A fitting place for a safe; and then the safe a fitting place for all the types of tools the average burglar carries; and this silent little burglar was about the average; not much more.

He smiled when his torch thrust its yellow glare into the safe. He could smile, too, because it is not

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often a man leaves a few thousands in notes of small denominations. There was silver, too, but that did not matter. It would be heavy to carry. However, his not to scorn, but to take, and he took. Then he closed the safe and turned to his gladstone.

At that moment light flooded the small drama. A man stood gazing at the burglar, who, in turn, stood staring at him. He felt a trifle weary—the burglar. It is these disappointments which take a great deal of the 'elan' from life; and yet they do happen.

The man in the mask, for he was in a mask, stood before the burglar and might have stepped from a novel. He was in the traditional and commendable 'Raffles' attire, immaculate in evening wear, and quietly confident, with a small but efficient looking pistol. It was neat, in keeping with the hand and man that held it. The man was not small; only neat.

'Damn', the little burglar said. Then he said again, 'Damn'.

'Exactly', the other man said.

The obvious solution should have flashed upon the mind of the little burglar, and cheered him in his failure. Point number one was the mask the other fellow wore. He would be what was known as a 'gentleman burglar'. His was to take what the other man had won; all this minus the degrading fact of heavy labour with jemmes and other nocturnal articles of trade. After this a midnight cocktail party, and all that.

The obvious solution did not dawn on the little man. Perhaps he did not read much. He only knew now that he was suddenly very frightened, and he would never have dreamed of challenging this man. He stared at the masked man. He stared at the pistol. He was very, very frightened.

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'Well', the other man said, and there was not much amusement in his voice. At that moment the little man bid highly, summoning up great courage.

'Who are you?' he whispered.

'Does that matter', the man replied, 'except that I am the owner of this house? That is my money you were about to take. You were a damn fool to think I was a damn fool'.

The small man looked at the mask, and then at the man. 'The mask?' he said.

'Yes', said the man. 'The mask. I've been to a ball. Does that satisfy you?'

'Yes', said the burglar, 'Yes it does!'. He passed a tongue over dry lips.

'And you', said the man. 'Who are you?' The small man started at that. A gleam came into his eyes; a cunning gleam. Then the gleam went, and he was craven again. Only the faint suggestion of truculency was in his voice; almost too faint to notice.

'Harker, is the name', he said. 'Happy Harker.'

'What?' the other man started. Then he was still, and his voice was quiet, with a deadly note in it. 'Harker, Happy Harker. *The Harker?*'

'That's right, Mister', said the little man, 'That's right. Harker. You've heard the name perhaps?'

'I have', said the other man. 'Harker was known to be a brave man. He won the VC, didn't he?'

'He?' said the little man. 'He? That's me.'

'Yes, that's you', said the tall man in the mask. 'It's you. Well, what the hell are you doing here? A brave man doesn't steal.'

'God help me, Mister', said the burglar. 'Don't you think I want to do this. It's the war that done it. I don't want to steal.'

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'I see, Happy Harker', said the masked man. 'I see. Well, what are you going to do about all this?' He suddenly seemed angry. He waved a hand at the safe.

'Nothin', Mister', said the little man. 'Nothin' but give the money back I suppose.'

'That's right', the other man said, 'and then what are we going to do with you—Happy Harker, Hero?'

'You can't do anything Mister', said the little man desperately. 'I fought for me country, I did. Fought for the likes of you. Risked me life I did.'

'Risked your life', said the other man slowly.

'That's right', said the little man. His voice was shrill with indignation, and self-righteous anger. 'Risked me life, and what do I get for it—for all I've done?'

'Three thousand quid if you are slick, and ten years if you aren't', said the tall man.

'Gawd, Mister, you can't do that.' The little burglar did not look like a VC winner, as he grovelled before the man in the mask.

'I can, but I won't', said the taller man. 'No, I won't condemn our war hero.' A smile passed across his face, and then he said sharply, 'But there's one condition'.

'Yes, Mister?' said the little man eagerly.

'You tell me the story that got you the decoration.'

It was difficult to be certain whether the little man was trying to look coy, or modest—probably a bit of both. 'You don't talk about them things, Mister', he said, 'they're sacred like. A man don't talk about what he's done'.

'This one does', the other man said harshly. He jerked his pistol towards the burglar. 'Now speak', he commanded.

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'Yes, Mister', the little man licked his lips. 'Yes, Mister', he said again. 'Malaya it was, and the Nips were coming for us pretty terrible. The Lieutenant in charge of us says things are going to be pretty hot. They were, too, because the Nips had come around on our left flank, and the Indians, who were supporting us on that flank, broke and fled. They were untrained and they did that more than once.' He paused, and it seemed that remembrance rushed in on him.

'When they raced off, our men were about to go too, and our Lieutenant into the bargain. There was a bloke with me, he tried to do the same—his name was Ferrety, Ferrety Furze.'

'A queer name', said the stranger.

'Yes', said the small man. 'A queer name all right.'

'Not one you'd easily forget', said the tall man. 'No', said the other man, 'not one you'd forget'. Then he continued, 'Ferrety tries to run, but I grips him, stern like. "Come back, you rotter", I says, "You deserting rat". "There's a gun up there", he says. "It's got to be silenced." Until then I hadn't noticed it, but when it was quiet between the shells and the mortar-tars, you could hear it, and it was causing most of the panic. Only one gun, but dangerous with them troops panicking. "I'll go, sir", I says, quick like. "Yes, I'll go." "Will you?" says the Lieutenant, and then off I goes. I can hear that gun singing away up there, and snarling kind of, and all the time Ferrety is with me, because I've got him fixed with my Tommy gun. Then we're near the gun and it's yammering, yammering'.

He paused, and the sweat was pouring down his face. He lifted a rough sleeve to wipe it, and gazed

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furtively about the room. The man in the mask stared silently down at him. He was calm, unmoved. 'Ferrety tries to run, but I keep the Tommy gun on him. "Don't try to desert me, you rat", I says. "You go to the left of that gun and get down behind that tree. Then start firing. Somewhere near him. Me, I'll go to his right and when he turns his gun towards the tree I'll rush up on him." Ferrety grins like he is sick, and off he goes. I crawls up near the gun, and all the time I am waiting for Ferrety's gun to attract the Nip's attention; waiting I am.'

He stopped again, and turned rhetorically to the masked listener. His face was tortured with remembrance. 'Does he fire?' he asked.

'No', said the tall man quietly. 'He doesn't. He runs. You are left with the gun, knowing that if you fire you will be machine-gunned because you are in sight of the enemy. There is no way back. You are alone. In fact there is nothing to save you.'

'That's right, Mister.' The little man stared at him, and some of the wildness had crept back into his face. 'That's right, Mister. He left me, the mongrel. Left me he did. Then, as I am wondering what to do, I hear the breath of the bullets on me face, and that whine which is something terrible. I'm not caring to go back, mind you, and I know I'm done in any case. There's only one thing to do, I says to myself, go on and get that gun. I does, sir. I kills two Nips on that gun, and captures it. I takes it back to the Lieutenant and he says I have saved a great panic. The next thing I know is that the Brigadier has recommended me for decoration.'

'Admirable', says his listener. 'But tell me, was it your anger against Ferrety which drove you on, or just despair?'

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The little man was uncomprehending. 'Lord knows, sir', he said, 'I just thought it was the best for the whole show, and I didn't care although I risked my life'.

'I see', said the tall man. 'Yes, I see', he said.

'And you'll let me off, Mister?', said the little man eagerly.

'Yes', said the tall man heavily. 'Yes, I'll let you off. Now get out of this place quickly, and never come back again, or by hell, I might not listen to such a tale again.'

'But it's true, Mister', the small man whimpered. 'Gawd's Gospel, it's true.'

'Yes, it's true', said the other man. 'Now get out.'

The small man picked up his kit, and looked fearfully over his shoulder as he made for the window. When he reached it the tall man spoke softly, 'Don't call again—Ferrety'.

The small man spun round quickly. His lips opened for a denial. Then his jaw dropped in terrified surprise. The man had removed his mask. 'Harker!' he gasped. 'Happy Harker.'

The tall man crumpled his mask into his hand. 'That's right, Ferrety', he said. 'That's right.'

The Day J Fought Kelly

HOW COULD I forget, anyway, the day I fought Kelly? That day settled a lot of things for me. At the time I don't think I saw it as settling anything, only maybe the particular issue with Kelly himself. But then, curiously enough, I had nothing against Kelly, and, as far as I know, Kelly had nothing against me. So we really didn't have anything to resolve between ourselves. Mind you, there was something to resolve as far as the men of my platoon were concerned. They wondered whether I could really fight Kelly. They wondered whether I was a phoney, for all the good physical training I had given them, and the instruction in both wrestling and boxing. One or two had had the gloves on with me, and there had been a bit of hard hitting, but on both sides it had been tentative. I was a bit of an enigma to them.

Let me go back to the beginning. I had joined the Army in 1940, and when a call came, in the first month, for those who wished to become Physical Training Instructors, I weighed in for the course. Our camp was a bit boring, and I liked PT and the wrestling and boxing that went with it. There was a history to all this, and I will tell you shortly about that.

However I went to the course, which was a bit of a stunner. You just weren't allowed to stand around. Everywhere you went you had to run. In fact they shouted out, 'Run! Run! Run!'. So you ran. Likewise there was no 'Stand easy!', so that you could relax. Mainly it was 'Attention!', or, as a very great concession, and not very often, 'Stand at ease!'. As everyone knows, if you keep that up you will produce powerful PT instructors, full of muscle and energy, provided you have some men left in the course at the last! We had about thirty left in the course out of the one hundred and sixty who registered. Amazingly enough, I was one of the thirty.

In fact it is simply false modesty which makes me write that last sentence. To be honest, I enjoyed every minute of it. The first few nights I ached, and was stiff in the early mornings, but that soon wore off and I felt I could have touched the moon had I cared to jump. I was jumping about inside my skin, mad to get at something. So when they made me a corporal—with two stripes—I began to take it out on the troops. Most of them had been in the Army only a few months, and they were not yet out of their office-or-store rhythm of life. To be suddenly set upon by an ebullient PT instructor was traumatic. They protested. They used the favourite saying, 'You'll keep, mate. You'll make shark bait'. That, of course, would be when we were on the ship, sailing for the battle area.

I can see their problem now, when I look back over it. Was this corporal all he made out to be? Sure, he could teach wrestling holds and all the good punches, but was he for real? They had other problems, too. Sometimes they saw me reading a Bible, and, since I never went near the wet-canteen, they

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were getting the idea I was 'one of *them*'! I grin when I look back on it all now. But then it wasn't quite so humorous.

It was at this time that Kelly came. Don't think that Kelly was one of your wild Irishmen. No, sir. He wasn't even a wild Australian. He didn't have to prove himself. He was big; he was powerful; he looked clean and strong and tough. But then, strangely enough, he wasn't hard-tough, or even a bit rough. In fact, given the right opportunities, he could have made quite a place in life. Perhaps he has. It is years since I've heard about Kelly.

'Kell', they called him. Everyone respected him. The reason was that he had done a bit in the ring. Mostly amateur work, but not all. They had put him into my platoon. I thought, 'How am I going to teach Kelly anything?'. Nobody had known any of the punches, and I guessed that Kelly knew them all. I guessed I would have to take him philosophically, especially if I ever had a bout with him.

I shivered a little at the thought. Then of course that need never be, if I played the matter carefully. I could get him to teach the punches, too. We could even give carefully prepared demonstrations. Those were the lines on which my thinking ran.

However, the platoon decided to work it another way. They made up their minds, and approached me when I was writing mail. I used to write a staggering number of letters. I was a bit insecure. I needed people to write to me, continually.

'Corp', they said, and you could have thought they were as sweet as honey, 'you must be just one helluva fighter'.

'No fighter', I said modestly, 'just a boxer'.

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'Kelly's a fighter', they said, 'and maybe he's a bit of a boxer, too'.

'Fancy that now', I said, battling the tide. 'I guess he is a fighter from all accounts we hear.'

'Right', they agreed.

'Guess I had better get on with these letters', I said. 'I have quite a few to write.'

They even let me scribble away for a bit. Come to think of it, that letter I was writing must have seemed a bit disconnected to the person who read it later.

They started on it again. This time directly. 'Corp', they said, 'why don't you take Kell on?'.

'Take Kell on?' I echoed. I shook my head. 'Don't think I will', I said, giving them no reason. I kept shaking my head, as though I was doubtful, but still thinking about it. I was trying madly to work out a good excuse. They waited. After a time I looked up. 'One of these days, maybe', I said charmingly, 'but not now. Right now I have some important letters to write'.

They looked at me, stolidly. 'Fancy that!' they said. 'Fancy having such an important letter!'

After all these years I can't remember the exact wording they used, so I'll translate it into the modern idiom. They looked directly at me and said, 'Hey, Corp, you wouldn't be chicken by any chance, would you?'.

I looked a bit surprised, possibly even a bit hurt. 'No', I said definitely, 'I'm not that way at all. Just a bit busy'.

Kurt, who was one of the ringleaders, with a terrific sense of the dramatic, of fun and of frolic, said gently, 'Corp, suppose you go on with your writing, and we make the arrangements?'.

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'What arrangements?' I asked.

Kurt was now really eager. 'For a real bout, of course', he said clearly. 'Proper referee, and seconds for each fighter, and, in fact, a real ring—with ropes set up and everything.' He was becoming enthusiastic. The group was with him, too. Their faces shone. They spoke brightly, happily.

'Real ring and everything', they said, 'with proper rounds, and breaks between rounds, just like a professional fight'.

I sat whilst they worked it out. I was thinking of Kelly, who had at least three stone on me (as we used to measure weight, that was forty-two pounds more than my weight, and I wasn't light), and was pretty fit into the bargain. Route marches didn't worry him, and judging from the bit of a work-out we had had on running and exercise, he seemed tolerably in trim. I didn't think I was going to like it.

The group was looking at me, keenly, intently. They were watching my reactions. 'Go ahead', I said briefly, 'make the arrangements'. I then had the strange and terrible feeling that my future in the Army depended pretty much on the outcome of the bout with Kelly. I guess I was faintly encouraged by the fact that it would be a structured bout. Nevertheless I wondered about Kelly and those forty-two pounds. Good old Kelly!

But what about me? 'Good old Paul!' I didn't hear anyone saying that. I wondered, too, whether I had been a bit hard with the PT and even the parade ground drill. Looking back, I know I was. Doubtless I was a heavy disciplinarian. Mind you, at the time I didn't admit that to myself. But I was wondering.

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Then came the day when I fought Kelly. Good old Kelly! That was what they were saying. Some had bets on the side. I didn't like the idea, especially when I heard that the odds were against me. Kelly had a reputation and had been a bit professional; I was nearly unknown.

A lot of work had been put into making the ring. It was in our own hut. The ser-major had given permission and the men had gone to work. I had to admit a slight sense of the dramatic. It mightn't be long, but I would go down fighting. I knew I had enough stubbornness for that. I thought of the line of the poem, 'My head is bloody, but unbowed'. I wasn't all that cheered by it.

Deeper cogitation was taking place. I had realised that the troops were really trying to see whether or not I was a phoney. That was the whole idea, apart, of course, from the old fun of the gladiatorial arena. I accept that as part of man, or, as I like to say, fallen man.

I won't go into the couple of days' intense training I had. Let's face it, I was as tough as a whip. Two of my mates, Curly and Col, had put me through the paces. 'Keep that straight left going', they said, 'and you'll have Kell whipped'.

Now it is a fact of life that I had been trained up with a good straight left. Good old Barry B had done that for me in the boys' club I attended as a lad. Barry B was a person all on his own. He not only taught me how to box. He also taught me how to write. He was an incredible person. I wanted to write his life when he went down in a plane during the war. I guess I half worshipped him.

'That straight left, Paul', he used to say. 'Keep it coming!' He used to go through a whole ritual,

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whether I was practising on the bag, or on him. 'Straight left! Straight left! Straight left!' It was like a chanted ritual, again and again and again, until my ears ached, and my arm with it. And all the time I was practising the most unnatural punch I knew.

As a kid I had fought all my older brothers. Some of them were kind, pushing me off, patting me about the face. Fantastic, when I remember it all now—those long-legged fighters, all bringing me up to fight, not knowing that one day I would meet Kelly, and my whole reputation as a person would be at stake.

We went out into the bush where no one could see us. There we practised. I would finish up in a sweat, but Curly and Col were delighted.

'You'll make it, man', they crowed. 'You'll trick him, even if you never hit him.'

As I was saying, the day came when I fought Kelly.

The long hut was crowded. Some sat, others stood. There was a vast audience, and a lot of blood-lust in it. We were both tricked out in white shorts and gym shoes. Kelly looked fine, and large. He was well muscled, darkly tanned and slightly taller than I was. I thought that maybe he had a little surplus fat, which I knew was not the case with me. I reckoned that I could be a lot quicker. But then I didn't really know. We had never even sparred together.

Talk about the arrangements! Buckets of water, towels, lemons and real stools, to say nothing of the ring itself, as though it had been transported straight from Leichhardt Stadium! And the seconds decked out in white, the ref in a beautiful set of white slacks and polo-necked sweater! It was the talk of the camp.

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They rang a bell for the start, and out came Kelly. He had no venom, I'll say that for him. A really friendly handshake, a grin, a slight look heavenwards. It might have been a prayer. I was considered an expert on the latter, and I was working on it quite furiously.

Then we were into it. Much to my surprise, Kelly's punch was not heavy, that is, when he got near me. I had been taught by Barry B to dance—here, there and everywhere.

'Get 'em tired', he used to say. 'Make them follow you. Then wait your chance. Keep up a good guard, let nothing through. Counter the blows. But keep away as much as you can, until it is time.'

I was glad of the PT training course. I was glad I had gone for runs every day of my Army life. I was glad of the two days' preparation. I was glad of the screaming, shouting crowd which was mainly on Kelly's side. If they had been on my side, I would have been scared out of obligation to them. When I heard them shouting for Kelly, I was back again at home. I was the boy again, amongst the older brothers. I was a bit mad at the unfairness.

At our school my next oldest brother, Norman, was the school fighter. He was long, lean, lithe and competent. We were day students. The real fighters were the boarders. They held the reins of sport, especially of the boxing. That is, until my brother came as a pupil. Then he literally fought his way up to the top. He belted his way up to the Cup. They called him 'the Boxer'. He was something! Me? They called me 'the Boxer's Brer'. I guess I was proud of it at first, and then disenchanted. It seemed to say, 'As a boxer you're nothing. It's your brother who is everything'.

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Mind you, I must say I was never envious of long Norman. I knew that, come a test, I might even beat him. I could do that easily in wrestling, but we never actually tried it out with boxing. Looking back, I don't know why.

So, when the crowd roared for Kelly, I was back with my brothers, hurt with the unfairness of older brothers wanting to see their whippersnapper younger brother put in his rightful place. The unfairness seeped into all my life, and there, in that hut, it was back again, like some reactive motivation which had popped up from the past.

I felt a deeper tension in my whip-tight muscles. Suddenly, too, I heard the voice of Barry B, 'Straight left! Straight left! Straight left! Keep it coming!'. It was like a tri-hammer in my brain, yet for some reason my brain was like ice, thinking clearly. If I had strong emotions giving a thrust to my arms and a dance to my legs, my brain was clearly, coldly incisive. It had to be.

We were in our fifth round. Kelly was pummelling away like the pistons of a steam engine. But they weren't connecting. Looking back on it, I can hardly remember Kelly getting in a good blow. Not that he didn't get in his modest number, but nothing with a belt to it.

I knew I was getting tired. I had led the movement, and Kelly had seemed surprised. He was not a proud man, but he had figured that forty-two pounds, plus a few good connections, would be all that he needed. He had worked that out calmly enough, and, of course, he could have been right—but for that dancing. He did not get as irritated by it as the crowd. They roared out, 'Get him, Kell! Don't let him get away! Eat him up!'

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It was one thing to shout it. It was yet another for Kelly to do it.

My brain was working coldly. 'He's tired. He can't catch me. I can tire him out if he keeps coming. But then I'll be tired and I won't have any gut for the punches. What about that straight left, Paul, my boy?'

All the time, I was dancing away, taking a hit, feinting, giving a hit, and still wondering about that forty-two pounds.

To tell you the honest truth, the thing which amazed me most of all was Kelly himself. He was never rattled. He took no notice of the roaring mob. He kept a fine grin on his face. His only emotion was puzzlement. I had turned out differently from his original estimate of me, and he was the kind of person who needed time to think over a previously made decision. With this I was highly delighted. Also I saw respect dawning in his eyes.

I could hear Barry B's voice, as though he were there at the ringside. 'OK! OK!' I muttered. 'You just watch the Boxer's Brer.' Barry B had been my brother's best friend. Here was I, reacting to Kelly just as I had, back on the lawn at home, to my brothers. Come to think of it, they didn't have any venom either. Maybe they just wanted to keep me in my place, but the reflex action wouldn't leave. 'All against me, eh?' I said to myself. 'Well, just watch this!'

It was the eighth round now, and they had opted for ten. I gauged the reserves I had and went into it without a trace of fear of Kelly. He saw me coming, and was surprised. He had traded enough hits during the other rounds, but this was different. Suddenly that straight left got into action like a constant piston action.

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Of course, if you know anything about a straight left, then you know it doesn't work like a piston. It just comes forward, suddenly, with a hammer at the end of it, and not too many can keep it up. Not unless they have been trained by Barry B—and I had.

I saw Kelly reel back. Also the roar dropped. Maybe they were stunned. I kept dancing into Kelly now, and not letting up. I drew up terrible reserves from somewhere, and they kept that left moving. There is a straight right, also, and it is good for a change. There is a sharp right-arm jab which comes from the hip and the elbow quickly, and I was into that, too, and an occasional uppercut.

The tone of the audience had changed. Col and Curly could be heard now. They jumped and shrieked and cried and advised and wept. I pranced on until the bell went, and Kelly collapsed in his corner, and my seconds did everything to freshen me. I could scarcely wait for the bell and the second-last round. I rushed to the centre, and it was on.

Kelly knew something, but at the time I had not read it properly in his eyes. He knew he had not been in deadly earnest. It was the nature and build of the man. He was kindly. Now he was not going to be kind any more.

At least that was his decision. He came with his extra forty-two pounds to finish it properly. No matter! I had triggered off that straight left and it was pounding away. Kelly would retreat, a bit baffled, and a bit battered, if I may say so. I didn't know it then, but Kelly had become those four hundred pupils at my high school, and those four brothers of mine, and even my berry-brown father who used

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to watch from the back landing of our home, the landing above the concrete steps. He used to come down if anything was wrong and he would put it right, generally when we lost our tempers. He had a stance such as I had never seen in any ring, and he had been in the ring, too. We never quite knew how or when, although all sorts of rumours would float around.

'Paul', he would say, as though he were losing his own temper, 'you cut out that rough stuff. You box properly or not at all'.

I would be blinded with tears of unfairness. I would fight on, scarcely controlling my temper.

I could see Kelly was whipping up everything he had, but I was not afraid, and I was not thinking of the crowd as unfair. I was not even wanting to win for winning's sake. I just wanted a record set straight which had not been straight for a number of years, and Kelly happened to be the means. Every punch I had ever known, every ounce of strength I had ever stored, and every movement I had taught my muscles over the years, went into that final burst. I say 'final burst' because neither Kelly nor I were going down for the count in it. 'Come here, Kelly', I was saying under my breath, 'and you'll get it!'.

And he did! He took it on the face, on the torso, on the back, behind the neck, close in, dancing away, high up, in and out. And he gave it! He hit every tight muscle I had, but I knew the power had gone out of him. I saw him back away and look at me, breathing in a terrible way. I should have guessed, but I did not. I stood there, having done what I had always wanted to do.

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Suddenly I was very, very tired. Suddenly the will to fight had gone. I knew what was in me, and in the same moment I knew I was at the end of the resources which were mine. I thought, after all, that I would have to drop my arms and say, 'Kell, it's all yours. I've had it!', even though I knew I easily had the fight on points.

Then I could see my berry-brown Dad, my brothers, especially Norman the Boxer, and with him Barry B, and they looked at me, not sneering but quietly disgusted. I looked at Kelly and started it all over again. Maybe I went for a minute, and maybe for a minute and a half. Finally Kelly backed away. He held up a gloved hand, then he dropped both.

'Corp', he said, 'I've had it! I'm done!'. He looked at me. 'I'll never take you on again', he said. He shook his head wearily. 'Not as long as I live.'

I could scarcely believe it. I had nearly dropped out ninety seconds before, and here he was, beaten! I waited for the understanding to come, and then, wonderfully, I was flooded with an intense relief. It was like getting to the top of some Everest I had always been climbing in my sleep, never reaching it in my dreams, and here was I awake, on the top of it!

The crowd came rushing in. 'Good old Corp', shouted the fellows of my platoon, as though they had always known, and, in fact, had been on my side. The liars! They had never really known, but to give them their due, when they did know, they were really glad.

I noticed some looking at me with awe, and that was a new experience for me. I didn't even try to cope with it. I just let it flow over me, grateful but astonished. I accepted the hands, the congratulations, and

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even the few who wouldn't believe that Kelly had fought it properly. I could hear them muttering about another bout, but I knew Kelly would never fight me again.

Suddenly I knew no one would fight me.

That was the day I fought Kelly.

When you tell a story you generally finish on the climax, and why not? It's a good place to sign off, especially with a victory and all that. However, that wasn't the end of the story and I hope you will stay to hear the full and authentic end.

I guess it started to go on when someone said in my hearing, 'Get a load of him! Get a load of Corp! The Battling Padre, eh?'

In a flash I knew something. Everyone had seen me read the Bible. They all knew I didn't go to the wet-canteen. Now they didn't just have a Boxer. They had a Battling Padre. I wasn't a chaplain, but then that didn't matter. I was an oddity. For some reason I didn't mind, either.

Not long after that day we went to Malaya, sailing away on the great hulking *Queen Mary*. Our unit was composed of sections which were allotted out to Brigade and Artillery Headquarters. Our own platoon had been much changed, and Kelly had gone to a unit joined to Artillery Regimental Headquarters. Our platoon had been allotted to Brigade Headquarters. Roughly speaking, our job was to lay and maintain communications with the infantry battalions within our Brigade, and even to the Artillery Regimental Headquarters.

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I won't describe the life and times of our days in Malaya before war broke out with Japan. When it did, we were incredibly busy. My own job was to lead a cable section which laid and maintained cable between Brigade and Infantry Battalion Headquarters. Because we were at Brigade, I had to apportion the use of the civilian overhead lines which had been given over to us by the postal people. They had gone, and we had stayed. The most difficult task was not only to apportion the lines, but also to see they took their correct cables; otherwise our switchboards could get horribly mixed.

The real problem was that the overhead wires had what was called 'transposition points'. This meant that the cables switched from time to time. A roadside pair would become a fieldside pair, and a lower cable would sometimes become an upper cable. Very irritating unless you followed them through, mile after mile! When you did follow them through and suddenly came upon another team which had commandeered your cable, it was even more irritating—a very mild word for how you felt.

Well, we did come upon a team who had commandeered our cable. Doubtless it was a competent team. In fact I knew it was, because its corporal-in-charge was someone I knew very well. Believe it or not, there was Kelly! Kelly had a signalman with him whom I had never seen. He was a reinforcement, and therefore quite inferior in the eyes of the old guard who had been with the unit from its inception.

'Kell', I said, 'it's good to see you'.

'Good to see you too, Paul', he said, and he meant it. Kell and I had a real bond between us.

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'Who's your mate up there?' I asked, pointing to the top of the ladder.

'Well now', said Kelly, 'of course you wouldn't know him. He's a reinforcement'.

'Kell', I said gently, 'tell him to come down. He's tapping in on our line'.

'No!' said Kelly, scandalised. 'Never!' He looked at me. 'Followed that line, we have, for about ten miles.'

'Pity', I said sadly, shaking my head. 'But it's our line.'

Kelly cocked his head on the side. 'Real sure?' he asked.

'Real sure', I said. 'Call him down, Kell.'

Kelly looked up the pole. 'Jacko', he said, 'come down. That's not our line. It belongs to their team'.

Jacko was an experienced blasphemer. His volume of oaths was terrifying. But he remained calm. He put the finishing touches to the connection with his blowlamp and soldering iron. Then he turned off the blowlamp. There was a gentle, but potent, silence.

'Cut the lines', said Kelly; 'I mean, our lines'.

Jacko told him that he would never do that. 'Not after all our trouble', he said.

'Still, you had better', said Kelly. 'This is Sergeant Olds here.'

Jacko said things enough to make any sergeant's ears burn.

Kelly looked sad. 'I think I'd be careful', he said. 'The Serg is pretty good with his fists.'

'Well now', said Jacko, 'I can use my own little fists a bit, if it comes to that'.

'Come down', said Kelly suddenly. 'Bring the connections with you.'

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Jacko shook his head. 'That sergeant don't mean anything to me', he said.

Kelly looked up at him.

'He beat me', he said. 'Beat me fair and square in a ten-round fight—ring, seconds and all.'

Jacko gasped and almost lost his hold on the ladder. 'You don't say', he said, alarmed. He looked down. 'Hey, Serg, it's all yours. I'll just snip these connections. See?' He held the severed lines.

I have never seen a signalman descend so quickly. He came across and peered at me. He shook his head. There was even awe in his voice.

'Beat old Kell, eh?' he said. 'Well, whadder y'know?' he asked the rubber trees and the nipa palms and heaven.

Kelly was grinning hugely. The two teams were grinning. Even I was grinning. Only Jacko was not grinning.

After that I didn't see Kelly for nearly four years.

When I met Kell again I was in the Repatriation Hospital. I'll refrain from telling you when and how I was wounded, and how I carried a gammy leg through three and a half long years in a POW camp. That's old news now. Also I was thin when I was put into that hospital. My berry-brown Dad was there, visiting me. We had talked a fair bit, and we had more to talk about when Kelly came into view.

He was the same Kelly, remarkably enough. Somehow he had rehabilitated quicker than I. Maybe he was a cook in the POW camp. I never asked him.

Most of that half-hour he spent with my Dad.

Dad had been pathetically grateful to see me come home. I hardly understood this new side of him. He had

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always been a Stoic. That was how he had taught me to hang on in the fighting.

Kelly shook my fist, sympathised over my leg, asked a few questions, and then looked at my Dad. He sized him up in a few minutes. A proud man. A hard man. A man filled with tender emotions but unable to express them. He could see him looking at me, trying to do something for me, but unable.

Kelly said, 'Great fighter, that son of yours'.

Dad nodded. 'I understand he's been decorated', he said.

'So he has', said Kelly, 'but I didn't mean that. I mean he's good with his fists'.

Dad immediately looked modest. 'Yes, of course', he said.

Kelly looked at him, comprehendingly. 'Don't tell me you trained him!' he cried.

Dad looked even more modest. 'Taught him a punch or two', he said.

I could have hugged Kelly. Something had to happen to uncoil my father. He was too tight, too emotional, too unable to express himself. We had tried for days, seeking to get to each other.

'He was slow at first', said my father. I grinned. That was what he thought!

'But you taught him', said Kelly, admiringly.

'That's right', said Dad, with continued modesty.

'Well', said Kelly admiringly. 'So that's how he beat me?'

Dad was suspicious. 'Beat you!' he echoed, welding an exclamation and a question into one.

'Beat me', said Kelly firmly. Dad couldn't cope with this, not all at once—a haggard returned son, a whole new

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emotional situation, a son whom he had never really thought to be a fighter, and then Kelly telling him I had beaten him.

It was a long silence. Then Dad asked, 'Good with your fists, eh?'

Kelly gave me a secret wink. 'Did a bit in the ring', he said, 'a bit of the old professional, you know'.

'No!' said Dad. He looked at Kelly admiringly. He was summing him up. He knew Kelly could use his fists. Then he looked across at me. I had never seen him proud of me before.

I remembered the day I had fought Kelly, and how I had beaten out my old problems. 'Hassles' they call them now, or 'hang-ups'. They had gone that day. That was why I could be so objective with my berry-brown Dad.

Kelly said, 'Done a bit yourself?'

Dad nodded. 'I was a southpaw', he said. He recovered and said with some dignity, 'Still am, you know'.

Kelly nodded. 'Ever in the ring?' he asked.

Dad nodded. He bent towards Kelly. 'Quite a time it was', he began.

As I said, I didn't have much time with Kelly that last time we met. They both sat on the edge of the bed talking, their faces away from me. I had never seen Dad so animated, and even now I don't know whether it had anything to do with me, or whether it was all about Dad's time in the ring, or what.

I do know Kelly showed himself to be better with his mouth than with his fists. I had never won a battle with my father, but Kelly did. They just talked on, and on, and on.

I was lying back, in a beautiful season of rest. I felt like a man who didn't have a scar from the past.

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I guess I shouldn't have been ruminating the way I was while Kell and Dad talked on, but there, I was. I was fighting again, going through those rounds with old Kelly. I was savouring every minute of it. I knew Kelly bore no grudge and I knew my berry-brown Dad could scarcely credit it, but that he knew it was true.

I just kept on thinking about it all. Thinking about the day I fought Kelly.

The Little Light

WHEN Ivan Stavanoski first moved into our valley, people were somewhat suspicious. It was not that they were against foreigners as such, but because the man was Russian they could only think of the Bolsheviks who were at that time ravaging Russia. I have to tell you that I wasn't even born when the Bolshies were doing their thing, let alone of an age when I could formulate my ideas of Russkis. As a boy, I used to read a comic in which wild-looking men with unkempt hair sneaked around with globular bombs which—in most cases—were smoking at their fuses. For me, it was a frightful thing to live in Russia.

Ivan Stavanoski always fascinated me. Sometimes I would think of him as a noble émigré, other times as a serf who had found his freedom. I wove wonderful stories around him, but I was never game enough to talk to him—that is, until I was in my teens, and then nothing would keep me away from his poultry farm. Not only did I like the noble lines of his Rhode Island Reds, the Black Orpingtons and Australorps, but I also loved the smell of the incubator and brooder rooms. I loved the cheery, cheeping chicks and the

lustly sounds of laying hens and proud roosters. I also loved his fish ponds, his grunting pigs, his few pet sheep and calves. I think it was Ivan Stavanoski who impregnated a love for the land in me.

Not, of course, that we did not have our own farm, our dairy cattle which were purebred stock, our stud pigs and also our crops. I loved those crops, especially the maize, and the great cattle-pumpkins we grew between the rows. Where have all the cattle-pumpkins gone these days? Where are all their varieties, shapes, sizes? What of those large round ones in which a child could nestle when they were opened? Ah, as they say, 'They were great days'.

I used to nestle at Ivan's feet, and look into his dark eyes as he told me tales of his beloved Russia. Sometimes his eyes would grow sad and gentle, sometimes fierce and stern, and at other times it would just be a longing look that they held. What a feeling man was Ivan. He certainly was very fond of his farm, even fiercely proud of it, but I always sensed that his first love was Russia, or rather its land, the rural people and the customs as he had known them. Many a time he would shake his head sadly over the cruel revolution which had changed all that.

He had carried many of his customs to Australia, and one day I will write a whole novel about them—so much material there is—but in this little story I want to tell you about Ivan's little light. But before I tell you about Ivan's light, I will have to tell you about Stef—that is, Stefanos Roundabout.

You might think that, having the name 'Stef', this other person was also a Russian. He was, however, very, very Australian, and crude as they come. I never heard a man swear in the way that Stef would c

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urse. Mind you, there was nothing unclean in his swearing. Just straight, strong blasphemy, except on Sunday when his language was pure enough. Somewhere he had Scottish ancestors, and somehow the message had passed down in the family that it didn't pay to swear on Sunday. Sunday was the Sabbath, and the Lord was particular in noting infringements of rules on His special day. Otherwise Stef skilfully used swearwords in a fashion that left him without a peer. He could turn nouns into adjectives, adjectives into adverbs, and adverbs into nouns—and so on.

It doesn't really matter, except that Ivan disliked Stef's swearing, and, in a way, it was that which set them at loggerheads. As they say in modern jargon, they were ambivalent, they had a love-hate thing going all the time. None of this that I write would have reached print except for Ivan's little light, his continuously burning night lamp, his perpetual flame, so to speak.

Often I would ask Ivan to explain why he lit his lamp every evening, just at the time of dusk. His explanation was simple. In Russia, the population lived without the benefit of electricity or even gaslight. What is more, the abject darkness of night could be terrifying. Leave alone the question of footpads, thieves and murderers, there was the simple matter of getting lost. You might think that folk would know their way home, even in the country, and perhaps you would be right. Without doubt the Russians were as canny as their Australian counterparts in the rural areas, but it was the snow that made things difficult. Only those who live in snow country know how the first fine fall of powdery snow blots out every landmark. In the quiet world that snow

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brings with it, the last light of day is eerie, a greenish whiteness that obscures the known things. Then let the darkness fall, and one is in a lost world. That is to say, a world in which anyone can easily be lost.

You needed Ivan to tell the story in order to enter into the fearful loneliness of a snow-covered countryside. The path you once knew would be hidden for months. The old familiar things were erased. You felt terror in this beautiful new world, this world of the unknown. As a boy, I would sit, head between hands, eyes rooted on Ivan, as he told me the stories of lost people. How one had been found within six yards of his home, but stiff as a board in the deep snow. Others had just been frozen in their tracks, far away from habitation, or quite close. Many nights I failed to sleep as I visualised those frozen ghosts staring lifelessly into that Russian wilderness. They troubled me deeply.

'Now', Ivan would say, like some severe schoolteacher, 'now you can understand why I light my little lamp. In Russia we all lit our lamps. We lit them so people in the darkness could make their way to help. From a long distance they would see the little twinkle and they would journey to it. They would be saved'.

'No other significance', I asked, '—like a "bright light shining in a naughty world"?''. I was studying Shakespeare at the time.

Ivan was a dignified man. You could not joke with him about these things. He took his relationship with God very seriously. His look was enough to reprove me. 'Of course the little lights have great meaning', he said. 'Of course they are lights to show the way through the darkness.' He would stare at me and say,

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'There is no such thing as the religious and the non-religious. They are all one'. His voice would become almost haughty. 'God is all in all', he would say, 'hence all things are His'.

As quickly as possible I would steer him back to the present, back to the matters which were immediate and practical. 'Now tell me', I said, 'how could anyone get lost in our valley? Why would anyone need your little light?'.

You could never break through Ivan's Russian dignity. 'It is not good to make the joke', he would say, stiffly. 'The light is for all, whether they care to see it or not. One does not ask regarding the usefulness or not. One just does that which is the custom.'

That sort of an answer never satisfied Stef. Indeed, his eyes would gleam at Ivan's hauteur. With a wink at me, he would say slyly, 'I reckon you must use a lot of kero with that little light of yours. I reckon you must spend quite a bit on it in a year'.

Still in dignity, Ivan would reply, 'It is not the money that matters. It is the custom'.

'Pretty silly custom, if you ask me', Stef would say. I omit the monotonous repetition of the great Australian adjective, and the not-so-monotonous variety of other swearwords. They simply interrupt the flow of conversation as I remember it.

'I'd give up that custom', Stef would say blandly. 'I'd become more Aussie if I were you, young Ivan.' Ivan was not young, and Stef's patronising tone would irritate him.

This Stef knew well, of course. I would watch the anger rise in Ivan. Suddenly, when he could stand it no more, he would rise in dignity, indicate the door, and point the way out to Stef.

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'Please to be going', Ivan would say in high rage. 'Please to be leaving me when you come with your laughter at great things.' His English would deteriorate with his rise in anger.

Stef, for his part, counted these little reactions as personal victories. He would stand up, and shake his head. 'You Russkis have some queer ideas all right', he would say, 'but one day you may get civilised'. He would scarcely refrain from giggling as he passed the frozen dignity of Ivan.

'So long, mate', he would say, and both Ivan and I could catch the note of affection in his voice. That is what would make Ivan explode when Stef had gone.

'He is the very great tormentor', he would say in his cold fury, and I would try to get his mind off the subject.

I would ask him, 'Did you ever see anyone helped by the little light?'.

I knew he had, and then his eyes would dance, and he would shout, 'Of course! I know the times when people were helped. Now you just listen to me'.

That was what I would want to do. I would drink in his tales of strange happenings, people—good and bad—who needed the guiding light which twinkled and glowed from the Stavanoski home, and, for that matter, from other homes. Reluctantly I would have to leave Ivan and his little light, and trudge my way back to our fairly stolid and mediocre farmhouse. I would wish we had some curious customs, and, thinking back now, it seems that perhaps we did. Perhaps Ivan saw much about us that was strange, and even bizarre. On the other hand, maybe we were just bland to him—I do not know.

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Now I must tell you the event of Ivan, Stef and the little light. I scarcely know how to begin the story because it all seems so improbable. At the time, it appeared probable enough to me, because I knew both Ivan and Stef, but something will be lost in the recounting, something about its reality.

My Mum had sent me across to Ivan to get a couple of dozen eggs. Most of the eggs were to be used in the soft, moist saffron cake that was her specialty. She would make it in a huge baking dish, and we would fight for the scrape before it was cooked, and the crusty parts of it after it came out of the huge fuel stove oven. Also eggs were needed for our farm breakfasts; you know, steak and eggs, bacon and eggs, fried tomato and eggs, and the like.

I was dreaming a bit as I made my way to Ivan's house, and, in fact, I must have approached pretty silently, because he did not hear me. He was talking to himself. In fact he was weeping, and this made me very curious. Ivan typified the self-sufficient man to me, but at this point he was far from self-sufficient. He was pretty close to moaning. Also he was speaking to God, a matter that made me feel a trifle uneasy. I felt I was intruding upon a fairly personal relationship. Ivan did not know I was standing there.

'It is Ivan, Lord!' he called out, as though God would not have known, or might not have heard. When no answer came, he said again in a voice laden with grief, 'It is I, Ivan Stavanoski. It is again the matter of the little light'.

If the Lord had deigned to reply, then I heard no answer. Perhaps the conversation was more in the mind of Ivan than in reality. Maybe that is where he heard answers. I do not know.

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'Every night for these many years', said Ivan, 'I light the little lamp. I know it is a good thing. I know these Aussie people do not have the custom, but then we always have had the custom. Doubtless, Lord, you gave us this custom from the beginning'. There was a silence, either for Ivan's own contemplation, or the answer of the Lord.

I felt deeply for Ivan. Now he was moaning, weeping. 'All I ask of you, dear God, is that you give me the little sign, the sign that it is good, and that you would have me continue the custom.' I could now hear him beating his hands together. 'Never do I get the sign. Night after night I fill the little lamp, and I light it, and these people who are my neighbours never say a word.' There was a moment of silence, and then a voice filled with exasperation. 'Except of course that Stefanos. He is the wicked one. This we all know from his blasphemy. This we know because he makes fun of the little light.'

I could sense that Ivan's grief had deepened. I was about to steal silently away, when his monologue recommenced.

'Oh, Lord', he was saying, 'it is not that I regret the money that is spent. Even in this Depression I will keep lighting the lamp, but it is the scorn I cannot easily accept. This Stef person is most irritating. Much of what he says seems to be true. No one cares for Ivan and his old custom. They laugh at it. The expense is foolish'. Now he was sobbing, and I felt deeply embarrassed for him. I knew foreigners could get this way, but I had never witnessed such a case. I was going to return without the eggs, but youthful curiosity gripped me.

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'Oh, Lord', he was saying, 'just give me but one sign, that it is good I keep lighting the lamp'. For a moment he went silent, as though awaiting an answer, and it seemed none came, for when he spoke there was a change of voice. I could distinctly hear the anger. 'Very well', he was saying, and his voice reached a high pitch, almost a shriek, 'very well, I shall not light this lamp tonight'.

I was awed. I knew that the Stavanoskis for many centuries had lighted their little lamps, come wind, come weather, come poverty, come prosperity. Even to my pagan mind this sounded almost like blasphemy. Because I felt my presence might be discovered, prove embarrassing, and Ivan's cup of humiliation overflow, I slipped back along the path a little and began to sing one of my favourite songs, a song by which I knew he would identify me. I heard a cough and a splutter, and the door opened to a lighted room.

'Mum wants a couple of dozen eggs', I cried boyishly. 'Mum's gonna make a saffron cake.'

'A saffron cake', Ivan muttered. 'Two dozen eggs.' He busied himself taking the eggs from a crate. He counted them out, took my money, and then, as though I would understand, he suddenly asked, 'This is no sign, hey?'.

'Sign!' I said. 'Sign of what?'

He muttered to himself, and then said loudly, 'No, it is no sign. Here, boy, give these eggs to your mother'.

I took the eggs and floated into the darkness. Ivan remained silent, and I imagined that the monologue—or dialogue—was now finished. Of course, I could not have been expected to know that this was the night of all nights.

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The story as I tell it from this point must necessarily be in the third person. I was not there to hear or see what happened that night. Mind you, everyone agreed that it was a strange night—all that darkness as though there had been an eclipse of the moon, when in fact there had been no eclipse. It took me some time to put the story together from all the pieces that I heard, both from Ivan and Stef and comments given by some others. Yes, it was indeed a very strange night.

I suppose the only thing about it that was not unusual was Stef's visit to the local pub. Along with his cursing, Stef imagined that a drink or two was extra proof of his own strong manhood. In fact, Stef—when you really knew him—was a very shy man, and a bit of a dreamer. I firmly believe he was an idealist who—like most idealists—had never achieved his dreams. For this reason he would let his anger go in cursing, and would demean beautiful customs and traditions such as Ivan and others held. It was his way of hiding his disappointment, and hitting out in envy at those who had partly achieved their dreams and ideals.

This night, guilt had nibbled at Stef. He knew he should not have ridiculed the Russian. In fact he had a high regard, if not a deep affection, for the émigré. He had genuine admiration for Ivan's farming, which was, of course, good. Ivan was an excellent host, and sported the best coffee in the district. Also he had a fund of exotic sweets and pastries, known, I understand, as 'bakemeats'. Stef's mouth would water even at the thought of them. Now guilt was gnawing at him because of the way in which he had ridiculed the Russian's perpetual light. True, he had only

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intended to tease his friend, but he had noticed that Ivan was deeply hurt. In his heart he tried to rationalise the matter, but when he could not win the argument, he fell to somewhat moody drinking, the result of which was that he stumbled home, dropped onto his rough couch, and fell into a troubled sleep.

When he woke, all was dark. When I say 'dark', I mean *dark*. It was deadly dark. I knew it to be dark by contrast with other nights. In those days I would often awake during the night and go out from our large house to look at the countryside under pure moonlight. I would often imagine the sheer whiteness to be the snow of Russia, and would dream stories in my mind until my southern identity became purely northern. This night there was no place for such dreams. As I said, the night was deadly dark. I joke: it was a deadly night-shade. Ha! Not a star to be seen, some kind of cloud formation brooding over us all, and hemming in the upper light. With that, of course, was the blackout.

Blackout! We never knew the word in those days. The electricity just did not fail. No one knew on that special night that the power had failed. To me, the night had a sort of apocalyptic mood about it, a mysterious brooding. Not, of course, that I knew the word 'apocalyptic'. I just knew that down in the maize paddock the shapes and forms of the cattle-pumpkins would be weird and tortuous. I felt strange excitement seeping into me.

With Stef, it was different. He had suddenly awakened, as though into a different world and age. Darkness gripped him, clutched at him, so to speak. It seemed an oppressive weight above and around him. He was swathed in it, as though it had become

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suddenly and heavily personal. He felt a sense of terror, a leftover, perhaps, from his bout of drinking. He rolled off his couch and onto the floor. Feeling a bit stunned, he clawed his way up to a sitting position. Then he stood, completely disoriented. A small panic seized him, and, instead of going for the Petromax lamp, he blundered on to his small verandah. Again, everything was cocooned in the same even darkness.

It was then he cried out, 'O Lordy, has the end come?'. You may laugh at such simplicity, but a man who will swear prolifically during six days a week and not on the other—the first day—is a man with a conscience, and a man with a conscience problem. What had been a nibbling, and a slightly gnawing conscience, suddenly evoked streams of terror. Stef's mind seemed to dart backwards and forwards, hither and thither. The words with which he had teased Ivan kept running around in his mind. He felt his way along the verandah, whimpering, gripping the rails, and making little movements in terror. Finally he stumbled off the verandah, down the steps he had made from block timber. His eyes were searching for Ivan's little light.

There was no little light to be seen. Only a night of solid darkness was about him, enclosing him.

'Oh, my God!' he cried. 'Oh, my God!'

He tried to orientate himself to Ivan's poultry farm. His limbs were weak with fear and, probably also, the deleterious effects of alcohol. Even so, he set out grimly to find Ivan, and to look—if possible—upon the little light. He knew it must be out there—somewhere. His fuddled mind shuddered to think of the dread alternative. The alternative, of course, was

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that he must be blind. Holding his hands to his eyes was no help. *He could not see them!*

Ivan, for his part, was in no less a horrified state. It was not that he thought the end of the age had come, and that God was about to arraign mankind for judgment. Ivan knew that was not the case, but he, too, sensed the darkness to be unnatural, an immediate visitation upon his sin of doubt. Passages kept coming back to him about a sinful generation asking for a sign. That thought bore down terribly upon him, bringing horror with it.

If you think I am exaggerating, please cease thinking that way. Ivan and Stefanos were really both of the same ilk. They would never believe that life and the world are limited to the five senses and the three dimensions. Both were romantics; both were incurable mystics. You might say they were superstitious, but Deity was no myth to them, no lofty and distant personal power. He—God—was ever so real, ever so close, never leaving humanity to its own devices.

Ivan was moaning. 'Oh Lord', he was saying, 'I sought a sign from you. How wicked I have been! Why did I not leave things as they always were? Why did I want you—at this time—to do what my fathers had never asked? They lit their little lights and never questioned The Wisdom'. Ivan tossed and rolled on his bed, shaking with human guilt and terror.

The answer was simple enough. Ivan could have taken his box of matches and gone out to light the little lamp. In his better moments he would have

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understood the Divine Mercy, but now he was trying to expiate—by contrition—for his great sin. He felt that if he suffered deeply enough and long enough, that somehow it would pay for what he had done; that is, for not lighting the little lamp. He did not know that his friend Stef was blundering about in the unnatural darkness, tripping over dry timber in the paddocks, barking his shins, and even falling over logs in the long grass. How was he to know that his blasphemous friend was sweating with terror, grunting and groaning with inner fear, his body scratched and grazed from contact with scrub and briars and other hostile things?

Stef's sense had guided him through all these obstacles towards Ivan's shack. He stumbled, fell, picked himself up, and finally reached the hillock. There was no sound from his blue cattle hound. Probably it was silent from fear. Not one hen squawked in the thick darkness. All things combined to maintain the mood of terror. Stef was sure that he alone was left in the world, and his bemused mind was brewing dreadful imaginings. At this point of his shock, he heard the wail of Ivan Stavanoski. At first his skin prickled, but then that sensation was replaced by a growing joy.

Ivan was wailing, 'O Lord', he was saying, 'how greatly I have sinned! I am asking you for the sign, and that is a wicked thing. Now you are punishing your Ivan. Not only do you not give him the sign, but you send the darkest night ever. This is the sign of my sinfulness'. His voice was rising to a crescendo. 'Oh! Oh! Oh!' he was crying. Then he was sobbing, 'There is no way back'.

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Stef, it seemed, had been cured of his blasphemy. Not one such word was mixed with his great cry. 'Ivan', he was shouting, 'I am coming to you, but there is no light. Why is there no little light? What have you done?'

Ivan was not only an intelligent man; he was also a man of certain wisdom. In the darkness he saw it all. In a flash—so to speak—the light reached him. 'Then it is a sign', he shrieked. He began to dance around on his verandah, to leap with great Russian ability, like any dancer from the Bolshoi Ballet. His joy knew no bounds.

Stef was tempted to use his old invective, but desisted. Instead he cried, 'Light your little lamp, for God's sake!'

'The little lamp?' Ivan shouted. 'Oh, yes, the little lamp!' He scarcely fumbled as he searched for the matches. A sharp spurt of light, a rattling on the lamp of the chimney, and a small gold flame flickered into being.

For Stef it was most heartening to behold it. For Ivan it was the restoration of a great tradition. He wasted no words as he rushed back into the kitchen. Stef could hear the rattle of the poker in the grate of the wood stove. He smelled the smell of rekindled red gum. He sensed that the next smell would be that of strong Russian coffee. The Aladdin lamp was also being lighted, and then there was the clink of cups and saucers. Good old Ivan was turning it on!

Stef struggled in, scratched about the hands, face and arms, and sweating in no mean fashion. He collapsed on the old rocking chair, his arms limp on the sides of the chair and his legs splayed out in front. He was breathing heavily, but something of a glow was

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beginning within. He had been brought back to life, out of the darkness of an apocalyptic terror. He was a human being again.

In front of him, Ivan was going as close to cavorting as Stef had ever seen him. He was rushing to and fro, backwards and forwards. He was pulling biscuits out of a tin, he was unwrapping exotic bakemeats, and he was stirring the rich coffee grounds in the saucepan over the regenerated fire. He was scarcely containing his excitement as he muttered phrases in a mixture of Russian and southern Australian.

Stef minded none of this. He knew himself to be one with his émigré brother. 'Hurry up with that coffee, mate', he was saying. 'If ever a man needed strong coffee, I am the one.' He knew he had no need to add comment.

Ivan was a man delighted with the sign that had come to him, gratis, from above. Even so, Stef was in a generous mood. He was expanding, you might say, even beginning to rock gently in the chair.

'Just you look here, young Ivan', he was saying, 'you had better keep that little light going, d'you understand? We need that little light, especially on nights like this one'.

Ivan was nodding. With one hand and spoon he was stirring the good grounds of fragrant coffee, and with the other he was indicating heaven and all it contained.

'Oh, yes', he was saying, 'we will keep that little light going all right. Oh, yes, my dear Stef, it is always needed, as you say'. His smile became gentle almost seraphic. 'Always it is needed, isn't it?'

He kept stirring the coffee.

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On the hill opposite, I could know none of this, but seated on the verandah of our farmhouse and staring across at Ivan's place, I found something very cheering in the flicker of the little kerosene light.

No Fear for Jeremy

No Fear for Jeremy

WHERE is he?' the father asked the woman. She had her hands in the bowl of flour, but was looking out through the window, down on to the grove of trees where they had the small dam. The dam, of course, was out of sight.

'I don't know', she said. She gave him a bit of a smile. 'Maybe he's playing at the front.'

His heart missed a beat. The little fellow might have gotten through the fence! He felt he ought to run, but he didn't want to scare his wife. Instead he came over to her, putting his arm around her shoulders. She nestled back slightly, enjoying the nearness. She gave a little sigh, half of contentment, half of sadness.

'I guess he'll always be careless of danger', she said.

He nodded gently. 'It seems that's the way it is. Stands at the back of the cows when I'm milking, but none of them ever kicks at him. He seems to have some kind of rapport with animals.'

They were both thinking of the brown snake, and him—the boy—searching for it in the bracken fern. Simultaneously a thrill of fear ran down their spines as they remembered. He had been giggling as he

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searched it out. The weather had been abnormally hot and they had been sitting on the log beneath the large pear tree, grateful for its shade. She had suddenly sat up, her back stiffening.

'Look!' she had said. 'He's chasing something!'

Somehow neither of them had been able to move. When the father had moved, it had been with a sickening dread. He had crept silently towards the back verandah, and had eased the wire, twisted double to make it a strong weapon, and with it in his hand he had gone on creeping with silent movement.

The boy had gone on giggling, rushing the low bracken and making snatches at whatever it was. Both husband and wife were praying that it was only a rabbit, and maybe just a rabbit kitten, but then how could they be sure?

At that moment the brown snake had slid out of the bracken on to the well-cropped and now lawn-like kikuyu grass, near the house. The boy had shrieked with delight and chased after the snake. He had been sure he could catch it. In a flash his father had rushed at the snake, and the snake, sensing a new danger, had turned to face him. The fury in the man had given him acceleration both of legs and hands. He had struck, using the wire weapon with deadly accuracy. Its back had been broken, but its body thrashed with reflexive fury.

The boy had been surprised. His rush had brought him up to the snake, and he was about to take hold of it.

'Jeremy!' his father had shouted. 'Don't touch it!'

The little fellow had looked up at him, trying to understand. Head on one side, his looks alternated between the thrashing snake and his father. His father

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was white in the face, and his body was shaking. It was then the boy had felt something which puzzled him. It was a new sense, and strangely enough a thrill compounded both of terror and delight. He kept feeling it as his father had raised the wire weapon a second time. The snake had gone still, quivering only slightly.

Remus the Queensland Blue cattle dog had joined them. Her paws kept tentatively stabbing at the snake, much to the little fellow's joy. He had sobbed when his father would not let him have the snake to play with. His parents had led him away, and his mother had given him sweet saffron cake, warm from the black oven of the stove. After a time he recommenced his secret giggling. They—his parents—had looked at each other, smiling with relief, but the boy had remained puzzled. He was sensing something new, and he had no word for it, although it was forming an image in his mind. Sadly he was knowing that in future he must not chase the slithering thing that Remus was now tossing around on the kikuyu.

It was years later they had told him about the snake, and he had marvelled a little. Now, as he thought about it, he wondered about his parents. He had taken them for granted along the way. 'I must have been a selfish little beggar', he told himself. 'They certainly cared for me.' He seemed, now, to remember the event directly, but perhaps he had built their view of the matter into his memory. He could not quite get back to the thing itself, but he sensed that there must have been an unconscious awareness of all things, and that nothing was in itself dangerous. He knew, now, that things were dangerous, but wondered whether that were truly the case or whether alarmed parents bred fear—in every generation—into their offspring. He felt that, back of everything, there

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might be an innocence and fearlessness that was part of what it was to be a creature in the universe. Again, he could not be sure.

The father was agreeing with the woman. 'He could be outside the fence or just in the front. I'll have a look.'

She heard her husband tramp through the leaves under the pear tree. He must have looked and not found the boy. She heard him go around the other side of the house. Then she heard him coming up the stairs. Now he must be looking from the height of the verandah, eyes shaded against the sun.

Then his voice came, tight and apprehensive. 'Come quickly, darl', he was saying.

She lost no time, slipping away from the cooking. She stood beside him, and there they saw in front of them, but yet some distance away, the boy with the horse. The horse was Major. They had called him that because horses had simple names like this, but in his case it fitted. The dark Clydesdale carried an imperious air, and he was always irascible. At times he showed a foul temper. He disliked work, and loathed being harnessed. For some reason he would quieten down if they could get the winkers held before his head, but—because of his height—that was not easy to do, especially when he swerved his head aside when he was cornered.

He had a reputation for lashing out with his hind offside leg. He had done this many times when he had moved over the traces and the man sought to loose the chains from the swinglebar, and reconnect them. Everything had to be done from the legside,

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and that was not always simple. Their neighbours warned them against Major.

'Saw him kick a man almost to death', the neighbour had said. 'Wouldn't like to have to handle him, myself.' That was why he had always been careful. Many a time he had thought of selling him.

He hadn't sold him for two reasons; the first being that the horse was as noble a Clydesdale as you would see in a show, and he often wondered why he had bought the gelding so cheaply. The other reason was that he got some kind of satisfaction from handling the horse. Maybe the danger was like a little spice, adding flavour to the dish of life.

Now he wished he had sold it. There, his arms wrapped around Major's hind offside leg, just above the hoof, was their little boy, Jeremy. He was in a singlet and a small pair of short pants which could not cover the drooping nappy. Major—for his part—was browsing quietly, cropping the spongy kikuyu.

She clung to his right arm, almost sobbing. Her breath was gusting, so terrified she was. He patted one of her arms which was clinging to him. 'Don't you worry, honey', he said to her. 'It'll be all right.' But he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure at all.

Nor was she. She wanted to cover her face, but didn't dare to look away. 'Oh, Ray!' she kept saying, and then, 'Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!'. He kept patting her arm, thinking. After a time he unloosed her arms, gently, and slipped down the steps. He walked bent, making a great circle so that the boy would not see him, nor the horse know that he was near. He crouched behind a clump of acacias. The horse came level with the wattles, but it was some distance away.

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The boy was giggling again, and hanging on to the hock of the beast. He was playing some sort of game, as though trying to pit his strength against that of the Clydesdale. The horse seemed oblivious to him, or perhaps he liked the game. Occasionally he would bring himself forward, stretching his head to crop some small clump of the grass, and the napped boy would hold firmly, being dragged along, to his own great delight. Once he shrieked his delight, and the father felt his body weaken. His bowels melted to water.

The bitch Remus was sitting on her back legs, watching. He knew her to be astute, but knew, too, that if she were to bark, then the horse might bolt, slewing around and crushing the skull of the child to pulp. He trembled with terror. He kept praying that Remus would use her instinct.

If Remus was not understanding, then the woman above was praying that he would. He saw—even from where he was—her clenched hands and the knuckles white with tension. He hoped she would not let go and scream out of fear and hysteria. That would startle Major even more than the bark of a bitch.

He knew it was the moment. He sent his voice along the level and frequency which would reach the boy. At least he hoped this would be so.

'Jeremy', he said, 'let go of Major and come to Daddy. I'm just over here'. If Jeremy heard then it was only to go into a louder fit of giggling, and a closer clinging to Major's leg.

His father insisted, 'Let go, Jeremy. Daddy wants you to come here'. There was no answer other than the continual crowing of joy.

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He felt the sweat coming in the hot flush that was spreading throughout his body. With the hot fear, a cold paralysis of the heart. His brain thumped with rising blood and intense worry.

Then a thought struck him. 'Jeremy', he said, 'Mummy has some hot biscuits'. There seemed to be no response, but the giggling stopped. His mind worked quickly. 'She has some cupcakes', he said, 'with cherries on the top'.

There was silence. It seemed the boy was thinking. His father then felt sick in his stomach because now was the test. The boy might push and shove in his delight, so that Major might kick him; or he might walk forward to run to his mother, in which case the horse would certainly lash out, as he disliked anything on his offside.

Then the miracle happened. Jeremy's arms came apart at the moment when Major was taking his next slow step. Jeremy was behind him, and his father was rushing forward, silent as could be. One arm shot out and he dragged the boy back.

Major seemed oblivious of what was happening, but not Remus. She barked as though relieved. Major looked up, then put his head down to graze again. The man's wife came tumbling down the stairs, running towards them, laughing and weeping. Jeremy had his arms out towards her and she was taking him from the arms of her husband, and tears were streaming down his cheeks as they hugged the boy together.

He—the boy—seemed impervious. 'Bickies, Mummy', he was saying, 'and cakies. Cakies wiv glass cherries!'.

The man and the woman both knew there were no hot biscuits, nor were there—as yet—any cupcakes

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quite worried when it shrivels and fades in the winter.

She says, 'Grumps, how come those ears die? Doesn't the plant want to hear any more?'

A question like that is hard to answer. I read clever books but they hardly even mention elephants' ears—the lily—although they say a little about the ears that grow on elephants. Apparently baby elephants are born with ears, and these ears do not go to sleep in winter, and they never drop off, either in summer or winter.

So I was stumped when Teena asked that question.

Now I have means of finding out things by myself, even without books. I lie on the bed, with my shoes off. I look up at the ceiling, my arms folded. If I do this long enough, and do not fall asleep, then all sorts of answers come to me, even answers about 'effluns' ears'.

After waiting some time one day, the answer came to me about why effluns' ears die away in winter. Even though the clever books never tell us that effluns' ears die away in winter, they do. Well, they don't exactly die away, but they do stop hearing, which is much the same. All elephants keep their ears in winter for appearance's sake, but they never hear a thing you say. They don't even hear you when you speak.

The story that came to me on the bed, when I had my arms folded and was not sleeping, is the one I am writing now. It only just came in time for Teena, who was beginning to think that Grumps doesn't know 'everting', when, of course, he does.

Effluns' Ears

Once upon a time, a very long while ago, there were no elephants, no, not even one. Because it was strange having no elephants to help fill the jungle and to root up trees and pull down great bunches of bananas from the banana palms, all the animals decided to get together and ask if a special animal could be invented which would fill jungles, root up trees—though not always—and pull down big bunches of bananas.

They went along to the Master who does this kind of thing, knowing that he had made many other animals like monkeys, rhinoceroses, lions, tigers, bears, antelopes and zebras. They were very polite to the Master, sitting in a circle before him and bowing down to him.

'What we need', they said, 'to make things go well, would be an animal such as we think could be called an elephant'.

'Why an elephant?' they were asked.

'We are not quite sure why he should be called that', they said, 'but whatever name you give him, we would like him to have two big ears'.

'Why two big ears?'

'Oh! So that he could hear everything there is to hear.'

'Land animal or sea animal?' the Master asked.

'Definitely land animal', they said, 'for he will be big and might be mistaken for a whale'.

'Should he drink water like you do?' asked the Master.

'Oh, yes!' they said. 'Or he will get thirsty.'

'Like a camel?' suggested the Master.

They shook their heads at that. 'Never!' they said. 'Nothing like a camel.'

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'Then like what?' asked the Master.

One monkey spread out his arms, waggled his fingers and drew a large circle with both arms. 'Very big, like that', he requested.

'Legs a bit like mine, but longer', said the hippopotamus.

'Tusks like mine, but better', said the wild boar.

'Also he must have a trunk', said the anteater, 'but much, much bigger than mine'.

The animals stared at the monkey waving his arms in circles, the hippopotamus with his thick round legs, the boar with his curved tusks and the anteater with his rather tiny trunk.

After thinking for a time they all said together, 'Yes, just like that'.

The Master nodded, and, because he often thought about things for a long time, the animals crept away, wondering whether or not he would agree with them.

After a while, they were wondering if it was time for them to return, when they heard the blowing of a great trumpet. They scarcely knew what a trumpet was, but they certainly understood the noise, for it called for them to return.

The lion, who had been rather quiet, led the animals back to the Master, and they gathered around in a circle as before.

To their amazement there were two effluns—er, elephants—before them. Since everyone has seen an elephant, it is not much use describing them. However, the animals needed to welcome the two new, huge animals standing before them. The biggest was the husband, and he was still trying out his trumpet, for he had never practised with it before.

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When he saw how interested the animals were, he walked down to the water's edge and drew up water through his trunk. Then he lifted his trunk and squirted the water into the air. At that they all clapped their hands and even the rather serious lion nodded his head as though he approved.

'Big, like I said he should be', said the monkey.

'Legs a bit like mine, but longer', said the hippopotamus.

'Tusks like mine, but better', said the wild boar.

'Also he has a trunk', said the ant eater, 'but much, much bigger than mine'.

They all clapped again. Then they went home. The elephants went to the jungle to try uprooting some trees and pulling down great bunches of bananas, and in eating them they were helped by the monkeys.

The husband elephant looked at the wife elephant and said, 'We have not been filling up the jungle much'.

'That is true', she said. 'We must do something about that.'

Some time after, there were more elephants which helped to fill up the jungle, uproot trees and pull down bunches of bananas.

There was one thing in those days: elephants were very, very noisy. They would quickly get excited and then they would trumpet. When one trumpeted, all trumpeted. They were very proud of their trunks, and would wave them from side to side as they walked, or would lift them as though they were always spelling a big 'S'.

Most times they were trumpeting.

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Now in those days the animals liked to sleep, and not only after lunch or even all night, but ALL THROUGH THE WINTER!

All animals slept through winter, perhaps by order of the Master. We don't rightly know.

A terrible thing happened. THE ELEPHANTS DID NOT WANT TO SLEEP IN WINTER!

It was horrible, as anyone knows who wants to sleep, but there is too much noise about to do so.

All day long, and often in the night, the elephants would trumpet. As I said, when one trumpeted, they all trumpeted, and they were more or less forced to keep it up all the time, although sometimes they felt tired and would have liked to sleep, but it was impossible.

After a couple of sleepless winters the animals all went to the Master.

'Dear Master', they said, 'Those elephants make a lot of noise and we cannot sleep'.

'I did what you asked me', he said. 'I made the elephant like you asked me.'

The monkey nodded. 'Big, like I said he should be.'

'Legs a bit like mine, but longer', said the hippopotamus.

'Tusks like mine, but better', said the wild boar.

'Also he has a trunk', said the anteater, 'but much, much bigger than mine'.

'That is how it turned out', said the Master.

'Dear Master', they said, 'can you do anything about their noise?'.

'H'm', said the Master, 'I will certainly try'.

The animals waited to help him try to do something. After a time the Master clapped his hands.

Effluns' Ears

'It might work', he said. 'I will now go to all the elephants and do what I think is good.'

He stopped and looked at the sun. He licked one finger and held it in the air. He looked at all the animals.

'When's winter?' he asked.

They all shouted, 'NOW! IT IS WINTER NOW!'.

Only the lion had not shouted, for he was a dignified creature. He coughed and said, 'We haven't slept for two winters, and our nerves are a bit ragged. Sometimes I even kill an animal when I am not hungry. Yes, Master, it is NOW winter'.

The Master went off to do his rounds with the elephants, and when he returned, he put a finger to his ear and tapped it.

'From now on all effluns—h'm, elephants—will be deaf in winter. They will not hear a thing until the spring comes, and then they will hear, so they, too, will wake up and wake up all animals.'

All the animals stood and cheered. They all shouted together, 'THIS IS A GOOD THING!', but by this time the elephants had gone to sleep, they could not hear and so they did not trumpet, and all animals made a dive for their trees, burrows, nests, holes, and so on, and immediately went to sleep. Therefore they did not hear the Master say, 'Well, that's a good thing, indeed'.

Now I am off to tell tiny Teena why the elephants do not hear in winter, and when they don't use their ears, then you know what happens to them.

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Of course the plant 'effluns' ears' is only a plant and so its ears can disappear in winter and it is still a plant. In spring it can get going again, and before you know, IT HAS NEW EARS, and probably hears everything we say, even this story I have been telling you.

I fear Teena will ask an awful lot of questions, but I feel I can answer them, and if not I will lie on the bed again, with my arms folded and my eyes looking up to the ceiling. That will certainly help.

The Boy and the Golden Gelding

The Boy and the Golden Gelding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Boy and the Golden Gelding

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

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

Goddie was remembering the time when the local auctioneer was trying to sell an unusually tall Clydesdale to his father. His dad had scowled at the animal. It was so large it would eat a lot, so tall it would be difficult to get the winkers on it, and when yoked together with another the pair would not be balanced. His final thrust was, 'I'm not so sure that he'll live much longer'. The auctioneer had thought he might sell one or another beast, if not this gangling black gelding. So he was concessive. With a bit of a sly grin to Dad, and a rueful look at the horse—whose name was 'Major'—he had said, 'You're damn right, Boss. He's a falling-to-pieces horse, isn't he?'.

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

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

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

The auctioneer had been caught by surprise. He must have been anxious to get him off his hands. 'OK, Boss', he had said, 'don't let's haggle. Give him to you for a fiver'.

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

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

'Don't have a tight rein', he advised. 'Just give it its head a bit. Not too much of course, but enough.'

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The boy's father wore jodhpurs, and he swung up into the saddle. He let the horse have its head a trifle, wheeled it, trotted it, and gave it opportunity for a mild canter. He returned and dismounted.

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

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

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

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

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

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He was a bit bitter about that. He knew it had nothing to do with dullness—for he knew himself to be far from dull—but he had a fear he would make the wrong decision. That was why he was slow to make decisions. Inwardly he questioned many things that they did, but never wanted to comment. Sometimes he would simply fear their gang-like attitude and methods, so he would wait until they all settled down, and he would slip into the meal quietly, hoping to escape their mirth and ridicule.

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

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

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

Now he was watching his father and the horse owner. He had little joy in watching and listening. He had a sickening feeling that the owner would refuse to sell it.

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His father was pressing the man, and the man was backing away, his face without a smile.

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

Goddie could scarcely breathe for astonishment and delight.

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

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

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

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

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

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the other man. 'I see you have some good pigs over there. I'd like to have a look at them.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The horse was unwearied, the boy vibrant with a new kind of living. They flew towards the farm, and the family. Someone had opened the gate and he flew up the track that they called 'the drive'. As they neared the stables the boy gave rein to the horse and it

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slackened its pace. By the time they arrived at the stable doors the gelding came to a stop.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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His brothers and sisters drew in their breath. He waited for the explosion, but there was none. His father's eyes had narrowed somewhat, but there was also a faint smile around his lips. More than that, there was no anger. Instead his father spoke to the family.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Boy in the Valley

The Boy in the Valley

HE HAD been born in the Valley, like the great carpet snake which lived above their ceiling; like the bandicoots which came in during the night and scampered over the floor; like the rock wallabies which bounded up the creek bed; and like the leeches which clung to you in the wet season. He and they were all creatures of the Valley.

The Valley was part forest, part pasture. It was North Coast farmland whose hills had been mainly cleared for dairying, but the more difficult terrain had been left alone, so it remained as rainforest. It flourished in the subtropical storms, the deluges that nourished the giant eucalypts, sassafras and cedars, and which flooded the upper country so that the water poured over the Fall, rushing down to flood the flats, and give life to the hills and the rich alluvial pastures.

In this the boy lived. He never asked himself whether he loved it or not. He liked it well enough. It was his home, his habitat, the only place he had known. He had been born at home—in the small plastic dome that was their first house. His parents had wanted the Boyer method of birth, and so he

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had come into life with his mother trying to bring him out into the world without tension and strain. His father's arms had been about his mother, and the wise old midwife was understanding and gentle. No sooner was he born than they had placed him in a tub of water which was at body warmth. There had been little light in the dome, just a mild lamp flickering amidst the shadows of its single room. Entrance into the world had been quiet—almost uneventful. Who knew whether it should have been tempestuous to fit a similar temperament, or sudden and realistic to break open the truth of the violent humanity that the child would meet one day?

He had been born with fair hair—hair that remained intensely blond as he grew. He called his parents by their first given names as they had taught him, never saying 'Mum' and 'Dad', but just 'Harry' and 'Liz'. They called him 'Roj', which was short for 'Roger'. They were proud of his body, knowing he would grow into adulthood as a strong, large male. They had principles of bringing up children, although they were parents for the first time. They would take him down to the creek during the day—even when he was a newborn baby—teaching him to swim in the crisp-cold mountain water. In the summer he would run about naked, and he came to like the sun as it soaked into his body. Though he learned to walk and run early, he only came slowly to speaking. They wondered whether he had been born dumb, so silent was he. They worried a bit because of the absent look in his eyes. Perhaps his mental powers were retarded. Yet he seemed bright enough, quick to understand them and their ways. He watched them always at a distance. When they came near, he

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was absent in his looks, as though he were keeping himself from them.

Sometimes they heard him giggling, and his giggle would grow to gurgles of laughter. On the first occasion, they discovered him in a grove, and he was watching a platypus at its games, its divings and cavortings. His gurgling sounds relieved them of the fear they had had that he might be dumb. They had known he was not deaf, for he responded reflexively to their speech. If they quarrelled—as often they did—he would shrink back from them or toddle off into the sunlight. When they called him for a meal he would—as often as not—come at their bidding. Yet there were times when he was within earshot, but still did not come. He seemed to be too busy with his thoughts to pay attention, and they let him be. It was their own philosophy of life. Time meant nothing to them, so why should it have to signify to him?

They were soon assured that he was a normal boy—as fun-loving and mischievous as they had been in their childhood, and as hungry. He ate their food well—their specially selected food made from the herbs and vegetables they grew in the garden. He liked the home-grown fruit, as though he could never get enough. In the early summer he would pick the macadamia nuts green, break open the—as yet—soft shells, and eat out the creamy hearts. In these ways he was normal enough.

They were not worried about him when he wandered the hills. There were other people living in the various groves of the cooperative farm. People lived like that—in little groups—although each family had its dwelling, primitive as that might be. If they worried at all it was about their visitors, who were

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numerous and who wandered where they chose, coming into one's dwelling at any time, expecting to be fed, though often sitting for long periods without conversation. Many of them were dull with drugs, and would fall into sleep for hours. Yet there seemed to be no reason to worry about child molestation, or that sort of thing.

For the most part he played carelessly. He would build a little dam in the streambed, and block the water until it grew into a long, silver sheet. Then, in a fury of excitement, he would pull away the stones and mud, fascinated to hear the roar of the water as it shot through his hands and legs, rushing on its unimpeded way. He would chuckle at the temporary power that had been his, and the new impatience of the released water.

Sometimes he would wander into inhabited groves and gravely watch the life and motions of his neighbours. Since he had nothing with which to compare these people, he did not marvel at their silence; but for the most part they were quiet. They spoke little to each other, but to him they were vocal—quite vocal—and with it, companionable. They seemed almost eager to talk to him, and he would respond warmly. He could talk to them in a way that he could not converse with his own parents—not that he felt as an alien to them. It seemed that some of these folk in the groves looked for a chat, a talk about things, and, since they knew his world, he was glad enough to converse.

He knew he could eat their fruit as freely as in his own family garden. He liked the long, slender bananas that had ripened on the palms, the guavas

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that had matured to a soft, sweet fleshiness. He would chatter away until the inevitable silence fell between him and others. Conversations ran only for a certain time. He saw the typical tiring, the gradual but insistent withdrawal, and then the lapse into quietness. No one sensed any responsibility towards another. Life was naturally existential. There was something almost wrong in building up substantial thought, or carefully planning action. The boy did not know this, but he learned the pattern and was content enough to play it according to the rules. For this reason he was not disappointed.

One game he did understand was the mumbling one. A person would not speak distinctly, but would mumble, almost incoherently, as though plain-speaking would commit him to ideas, and even to action. So thoughts strayed out from the speaker, but were lost on the air. Not, however, to the toddling Roj. Far from being deaf, he was acute of hearing. He would pick up the undertone beneath the blurred and muffled enunciation, as though he could register on any sound frequency—be it high or low. It was as though he penetrated back into the mind of the utterer and, what is more, could perceive what the person would not utter. It was like insinuating oneself into the other person. In a subtle way he was learning to read people's thoughts by their gestures, their characteristic movements and the things they left suspended in the air—unfinished things.

If he thought of remembering, then recalling his short past was a rare occupation. He had been taught to live in the moment, for the moment, not disciplining time or action. Nothing seemed to have a goal, or even a purpose. One just did things, and this

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was good enough for him. It allowed him to wander where he willed, think what he would, but committed him to nothing. He could eat when food was there or refuse to eat—just as he willed. He learned this from his parents, unconsciously.

His limbs grew strong and vigorous. He could scale a hill with ease; chase a rock wallaby with glee; climb a tree with curiosity, looking into nests without even touching the eggs or the pink babies, or the half-feathered fledglings. He rarely distinguished between natural ugliness and beauty, accepting everything as it came. He had no codes of appreciation or rejection, but he noticed his parents had certain acceptances and rejections. He would listen to their conversations—sometimes mumbled at each other—and picked it up that they disliked authority in all its forms. He often heard them talk about the Government, and he wondered at this monster. He knew his parents collected money from the Government, but how or why he never troubled to know. He knew that 'out there', that is, beyond the Valley, unhappy and unfair people carried on their business of life.

It was natural that he should grow somewhat sectarian. His parents took him along to the tribal councils of the 'Co-op', as they called it. What he heard was what he took life to be. It flowed as they said it should, and he sensed that this was the only way—according to what the people said. They, themselves, would sit or lie around, seeming to show no great interest, but if special proposals were made they seemed not to like them. They wanted no organisation, no planning, no change to things, and certainly they disliked bright initiatives that were suggested. They wanted only enough agreement to preserve

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their lotus-eating existence. They believed in the total independence of each person within the agreed community.

Organisation and planning were suspect. These were the things they had known in their childhood, and had hated. They had disliked schools and teachers, the local society—its municipal officers, and its police force. They had chafed under the restrictions of rule at home and abroad, and been sullen when called to make their way in the world. They wanted no way—no planned path—but just an ease, a freedom from the constricted, useless kind of life their parents had lived. In a moment of rejection they had dismissed all that was adult rule, all that was repressive, and with it the whole of materialistic society. They believed it was their right as humans to enjoy the world into which they were born, and not to have life hedged about with frustrating restrictions, dominations by others and the artificialities of crass materialism. Their assessment of what the older generations had done for humanity in history was unimpressive. Having made these wearying judgments, they ossified them; using them as the basis and justification for their future outlook. Their new culture—so determined—some called 'counterculture', but they called it 'alternate lifestyle'; nevertheless they were glad if it did counter the culture they had come to hate.

None of this the boy understood. He knew the people about him were intelligent. Since he had no knowledge of the outside world, he took what he saw to be the norm of life. If people lay in the sun naked, then that was how things were, and if they smoked the pungent 'grass', then that was what people did.

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However, he would often grow uneasy when he heard arguments, fierce accusations and strong debate. 'Flower power' sometimes became 'fruit fight', and he sensed nothing gentle behind this. For the most part his own parents were gentle, though even they had their times of argument, when he felt the rising up of violence—if not in their actions, yet in their words. In the tribal meetings he knew the arguments were intended to prevent any so-called progress. He had not understood this when he was a toddler, but later he comprehended. The comments of his parents helped him to know it all. It seemed to him that his parents were even more intelligent than the other members of the tribal council.

His first school was in the Valley. The teachers themselves lived in the Valley community. The tribal council had agreed there should be a school, but that it should be staffed by locals. The Education Department folk had come, had looked at the house that was to be used as a school, and at those who would constitute the staff. There had been little difficulty from bureaucracy in agreeing to the arrangement.

Roj was one of the first pupils. He went to school naked and was amongst other such children, but he noticed that after some days he was the only one without clothes, and he asked his parents to let him wear clothes. They looked at each other, reluctantly agreed, and he felt happier. It was a small incident, almost unnoticed, but it left its impression upon him.

Whilst life at school was hardly regimented, he noticed that teachers changed when they were in the building. In their groves—in their own homes—they

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were relaxed, perhaps indolent. At school they seemed to have some sort of purpose, and this puzzled him. They did not give commands, but they tried to lead him and his friends into some kind of knowledge. Again, he understood that this was simply the way things were, and he did not chafe. However, if they ever crossed his will by a rare demand or command, he let them know it, not by argument, but by ignoring them. They seemed to understand, and avoided conflict. He had unconsciously learned this pattern at home. His parents—for the most part—avoided conflict by leaving things alone that might cause arguments.

He came to see that making decisions was an almost unknown thing, whether in the tribal council, in his home or in the school. Again he did not consciously come to see this. Perhaps he felt it. He knew decisions were to be avoided. For some reason they linked up with planned life. Because of this, meals were at any time—generally when they felt hungry. Often his parents would talk about buying something, but they seemed to leave the matter suspended. Perhaps on a sudden impulse they would do something—buy certain goods or refrain from buying them. At other times they would agree to do something, but then never do it.

He respected his parents without knowing what respect really meant. His father lived away in a world into which he could not enter. He would catch his father scribbling on paper, and for that moment his father was another person. Then he would stop, throw down his sheets of paper and wander off to have a smoke. Some days his male parent would

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have an easel out at the front of their small house, and he would be painting. He would love to paint the Fall, always making a different kind of picture. Roj would look at these curiously, finding it hard to see the Fall just in that way.

His mother always seemed to be doing something, but then also to be doing nothing. She would wander about in the garden, but since she never pulled any weeds it always seemed to be the same. Once he asked her—in a rare question—why she did not pull the weeds, and she looked at him a bit aghast.

'All plants have souls', she said, 'and you mustn't kill souls'.

When he asked his father, that man looked serious and said, 'You might have been a weed in a former life, or might be in your next life, so how would you like to be pulled up?'. It made him wonder about weeds a lot. He even wondered why they were called 'weeds'. Also he was not sure his father really believed the sort of thing he said about plants. Often when he talked like that there was a faint, curious smile about his lips.

He had always accepted the fact that his father never worked for anyone but himself. It seemed he liked it that way, but one day he went off to work for a farmer. He came home tired, but happy enough. Then he went off for many days, and the boy asked him why he did it. He just gave one of his secretive smiles but did not answer. Perhaps he knew that if he mumbled evasively his boy would understand it all.

The outcome of the work was that his father had some special money. He went off to the local town, Valleyton, and although school was still in session,

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he took his son with him. They rode in the old bus, and Roj felt happy. He had only been in the town once or twice, and this was an adventure. The place was strange—exotic. It had different air, different smells, different sights and different people—vastly different people. The place alarmed him slightly, but it also fascinated and drew him.

His father didn't seem to care much for the town. He was about getting second-hand hardwood timber. He looked at it pretty closely, enquired about prices, wrote down and worked out costs, and then purchased the timber. He also looked at second-hand galvanised iron, turning it over to see whether it was rusty or not. He bought what he called 'stumps'—stubby concrete blocks—for foundations. He also looked at a bit of softwood, but, for some reason of his own, would not have anything imported. At one place there were hundreds and hundreds of second-hand doors, and windows which were in frames, along with what they called fascia boards, rafters and things like that.

He saw his father pay out money, and the men stack the materials on to a truck. When it was tied with ropes his father said to him, 'Get in, Roj, we are going home'. The truck was fairly old, but it chugged and wheezed and groaned from Valleyton to their Valley, and made its way down the rocky road, and up the kikuyu-clad slopes until they reached the makeshift building they had always called 'our house'. Once it had been a dome covered with plastic, but gradually they had changed it into a two-roomed shack. The boy had not thought to compare it with other homes in the groves. He had just accepted it as the place in which he lived.

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It was quite an experience for him to see his father a bit purposive, for apart from planting vegetables and fruit trees, doing a bit of scribbling and painting, he generally lay about, stretched out on the grass, or sometimes reclining against a tree if the sun was hot. Often he was just lying on his bed reading.

His mother lay about a lot also. Sometimes she would go up to the Co-op store to buy things, but when she came back his father was generally a bit angry at what she had purchased. This was regular and he did not think much about it. When they arrived back with the timber, galvanised iron, windows and doors, his mother became quite alert. Her eyes shone a bit, and she looked at his father with some respect.

All she could say was, 'Fancy that, eh?', as though she never suspected he could do it.

The men on the truck didn't want dandelion or herbal tea, so his mother brought out the coffee she used only when she was depressed, and gave them a cup, after which they went away in the truck, trundling over the kikuyu turf and up the mountain road.

His father came back in the late afternoon with one of their friends from a faraway grove on the Co-op farm. They measured an area of the grass near the house, and hammered pegs into the ground. They talked a lot. Roj had never seen his father so animated; nor his mother, for that matter. They rarely used a person's name to his or her face, but often said 'You'. However, on this occasion, his mother kept calling her husband 'Harry', and in his relaxed mood he—for his part—called her 'Liz'. Sometimes when she was angry she would call him 'Henry', and he

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would retort with 'Elizabeth', but there was none of that on this late afternoon.

His parents talked a long time about what they were going to do, and the boy became hungry and tired, but they ignored him. He looked around for something to eat, found it, and then went to bed. When his parents came into their bed he could hear them chattering on.

Usually he was up first in the mornings. Sometimes his parents slept until late in the morning, but today his father was up before him, and was digging holes in the turf. The holes were quite deep, and, after a time, he was setting the concrete stumps into them, and unrolling a large ball of string and making sure the stumps were all level on the tops. His father was also making sure that the building-to-be was properly set out in accordance with the measurements they had made the day before. At midday his father's friend Joe from the faraway grove arrived with an old ute which was filled with tools of all kinds.

After a drink of 'natural' coffee, they set about stamping around the stumps with a crowbar; lining them up with a spirit level to be sure they were upright; and laying joists across them—temporarily—to be sure they were absolutely level.

In the days that followed he watched the miracle of a new house being built. It was nothing fancy—the boy knew that—but it was what it was doing to his father and mother that fascinated and mystified him. They were as two people who had come to life. He wondered whether this was temporary or not, but half hoped it would last. One part of him wanted to go back to the drifting kind of life they had lived, but another part had become excited. He had never

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thought about having a purpose before, but this was what it seemed like to him. He began to wonder whether his parents had once been like this, and were now returning to it.

Sometimes the ute had to go to Valleyton to get things they had forgotten about, like nails, and strapping iron, and insulation; and in the middle of it Joe had to go off to work to get some money, and his father—Harry—thought he would go with him, as they had not been able to buy the flooring. So the shell of the building stood there, and sometimes the rain beat through it and it looked like a derelict thing, but the three of them were always thinking about it.

They were able to get some old hardwood flooring—tallow-wood, if you didn't mind! It was second-hand from an old church hall, and was dirt cheap. Joe marvelled at Harry's buying, and they went off to cart it in, though it was a bit difficult, as they had to tie it over the roof of the ute, and let it hang over a fair bit at the back. Roj admired the red bits of cloth at both ends to warn the people of what was coming—or going!

When the house was finished, more people came. They had been coming in dribs and drabs, looking at the work, some admiring—though reluctantly—and some critical, and others just indifferent. It was at Harry and Liz that they looked, as though they had not suspected the couple would ever do anything like this. One night they had a party with music and dancing, and special breads cooked by one of them in his new oven, and there were different kinds of foods—some of which Roj had not previously tasted. The dancing and eating and drinking went through the night, but Roj had gone to sleep in his bed in the old

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shack and did not hear a lot of it. He was a bit surprised in the early dawn to see many of them asleep on the turf, even though there had been a heavy dew. Some of the folk had not gone to sleep, but looked weary in the early dawn. For the most part they were silent, as though they had worn themselves out with conversation. He could smell the pungency of their 'joints' as they smoked away.

That day was the very day they moved into the new house, with its kitchen-living room, its laundry-bathroom and its two modest bedrooms. The old shack was left standing for the father's writing and painting work, and for storing the garden tools and other bits and pieces. His parents made sure it was not habitable for the vagrants who wandered through, looking for a toehold in this modern Shangri-la. For them to make such a decision was little short of radical. It did not go unnoticed, and was the subject of the next tribal meeting.

The next outstanding thing that happened was the small solar panel. No homes had electricity, and although here and there there were transistor radios, yet television was not only unused, but it was also hated and unwanted. Since solar power fitted their lifestyle, they permitted that form of power. A few of the homes had wind-driven or pedal-cycle-driven power, but it was mainly for light in the homes or sometimes for directly driving a washing machine. Most homes had petrol or kerosene lamps. A few used only candles.

The boy was intrigued by the white light their one fluorescent lamp brought to the house. Because he could now read a little, he took out the slim books his

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Not too many seemed to think everything over. Their ideas seemed quite fair to him.

One day, almost without thinking, he said to his parents, 'I want my hair cut'.

Because they occasionally trimmed the long, fair tresses, they were not surprised. His father said, 'Get me the scissors and I will snip a bit off'.

'No', he said fiercely. 'I just don't want a bit off. I want it like they have it in the town—real short.'

His father and mother exchanged looks. Then they stared at him, and he felt uneasy. He wondered whether his father was angry, but when a faint smile appeared he knew things were all right. His mother didn't smile, and kept looking at his father.

'You', she said accusingly, 'you aren't going to cut it like that'.

'Yes, I am', he said. 'I'm not going to repeat history and get angry like my father did, when I wouldn't let him cut it. He doesn't know why he wants it cut, but cut it we will.'

The boy felt the gentleness of his father as he snipped at the soft locks. He watched them fall to the floor like some kind of golden rosette about his feet. He didn't know why this should be significant, but he knew it was. He also felt an edge of excitement in himself, especially as he saw his mother frowning. He had made some kind of decision and that was like a new experience. It was new for him to feel power within himself.

His father said to him, 'You clean up that hair, Son'. The word 'Son' stuck in his mind. It was not a word his father had used before. It was as though his father was acknowledging a new and clear relationship.

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He found himself saying slowly, 'Yes, Dad', but not knowing why he was saying it. His mother looked faintly surprised, and his father just dropped his gaze as he always did when he wanted to hide his feelings.

The next special event was the television set his father brought home from the second-hand shop in Valleyton. It was black and white, and not colour, but Roj didn't mind that. His father said it was to get more political news, something about conservation, and about world peace. It seemed television was now essential, no matter what others thought.

At first they could not get it to work, and his father thought it might be something to do with the voltage of the storage battery, but after a bit of flickering and strange geometric patterns on the screen, a clear picture suddenly emerged. The boy's heart gave a leap. He knew nothing about stations and channels, and was stunned by the variety presented to him. He knew his picture books off by heart, every line and whorl and angle of them. But this was different—so very different!

In front of him was, to his eyes, a new world. It was not that he had not seen some of the things before, but here was such a variety that his mind couldn't absorb it all. He wondered about his parents, and how they would view all of this.

His mother didn't seem to like it much. Sometimes she would stand up, go to the set and turn it off. His father's face would darken with anger. Then an argument would begin, in which he heard bits and pieces about himself.

'It would not be good for the boy.' 'It would be bad for the boy.' 'It is against everything we have ever

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believed.' 'We haven't told the tribal council about it. They won't approve.' 'We are free to do what we want to do. This isn't a fascist society.' 'It will kill his mind—make him a moron.' 'It will make him understand the world he lives in.' They said these and other things.

All he knew was that there was another world out there which he wanted to know. He didn't necessarily want to go into it or be part of it, but he wanted to know about it, and even to understand it. He felt his father wanted this to happen, but his mother was afraid of the effects it would have on him.

Now he was seeing his father and mother in a different light. The change in his view of them had not begun with the new house, the solar panel or the advent of the television. It had begun, curiously enough, with the visits of his grandparents. His mother's parents had come first, and he had thought them very wonderful. Having overheard critical comments by his own mother and father, he had been surprised at how warm and affectionate his grandparents were. He had thought they would be remote, somewhat grim, and even—perhaps—harsh. Far from being this, they had taken to him wonderfully. He saw also his mother's respect for them, in spite of all that she had said about them from time to time.

He was puzzled as much when his father's parents came. They, too, were busy people, occupied with business, but they had taken time out to travel the two thousand miles to see their grandson. He noticed how sensitive they were to the folk of the Farm, the members of the Co-op, but they made little of their problems. They, too, were warm and loving to Roj, as

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well as to his parents. They all went off in their station wagon to Valleyton, and there they bought things for the house. Grandfather purchased some strong second-hand guttering, and he and Roj's father nailed it to the rafters, and had a downpipe into the garden. His grandmother insisted on buying a second-hand lounge suite for the living room, although it barely fitted in. Roj rolled himself all over the lounge and the chairs with joy and abandon. On the Sunday they went across to see the Pacific Ocean, and they played on the beach, gorging themselves on new kinds of food. He thought he had not had so much fun before.

When the grandparents were gone, his own parents argued as to whether they should go south to visit them in the Christmas period.

His father said, 'Roj will meet his cousins, his uncles and his aunts'.

His mother said, 'He will get caught up in it all'. She looked disgusted. 'He'll start eating that trash they all eat.'

His father was thoughtful at that, and went out into the garden. He always seemed to go into the garden when there was a problem. After his thinking there, he came back and talked to Roj's mother.

'I think you're right', he said. 'He'll get caught up in all that if we visit down there.' Perhaps he was thinking, too, of the cost.

The boy's mother said sharply, 'He can get caught up in all that just by looking at the TV'.

He noticed after that event that his looking at TV was strictly monitored.

He also noticed that when folk were coming to the house, his father would cover over the TV with a

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cloth, putting a vase with a dried flower arrangement over the cloth. The boy knew that no one was deceived. He, himself, thought this strange. Generally his parents did not care what anyone who lived outside their home thought.

It was strange that they let him go to Valleyton Primary School. His father and mother had had an argument about him going to a non-Co-op place of education, but his father did not like one of the Co-op teachers. So each morning the boy would trudge to the bus and go off with the other children. Along the way they would pick up children from the farms and the villages. Some of them had long hair, but some didn't. At first he felt strange at the way he dressed, but then other children of the Co-op dressed that way, and they didn't seem to care. The better dressed children didn't seem to notice or discriminate. After a time he forgot about the differences.

The school, of course, was different. He was glad he had seen school classes on TV. He was glad he had learned about a lot of things from that screen. It was still strange to him—especially the food the children ate. He kept away from the school tuckshop and the delicatessen across the road. He found himself trembling when the children ate pies and he saw the meat dribbling from them. He felt almost ill in the stomach at the sight and smell of meat.

His parents had often spoken of the killing of animals. In their home they would have no meat or animal by-products. Wool they could accept, but not sheepskins. After some years they had accepted eggs for eating, but not chicken flesh. His mother said lolly

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jellies came from calves' hooves, and so he did not eat that sort of sweet.

Then there were the additives in food. He had been warned against them. They would be harmful. Once he had a vagrant thought, 'Well, what if they do a bit of harm? Surely anyone can recover'; but at the same time he knew his conscience would accuse him. That was the strange thing—his parents had slowly trained his conscience to eat only vegetables and fruit. He had not even been aware they were training him.

Living on the Co-op, he had not known he was good at sports. Both grandfathers had asked him whether he played cricket or not. They were both cricketers, and had been from boyhood. Looking at matches played on TV, he had sensed he could also play. At high school they included him in their side. He was not much of a bat, but he could bowl well, and was superb in fielding. In winter he opted for soccer because there was less contact encounter, and he could not remember ever striking a person. He had long been proud of his father as a man of peace, although he had often wondered why his father could get angry at so many things, if he was wholly at peace.

The most dramatic of changes took place when the boys and girls went off on a high school camp. It was to be a teaching and coaching camp, but it was also to be good fun. They were to go north to Brisbane, and see that city, and visit its special places. When his maternal grandparents knew he was going to camp, they sent him money, while his paternal grandparents sent him a camera and some rolls of film.

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The vast city awed him. He felt small and frightened and unable to cope. Most of the children seemed to take it in their stride. He was glad there was another boy from the Co-op—Reg Smalley—and they bedded down next to each other. They also took time to share their strangeness. He had scarcely known Reg until they had gone to high school, but there they supported each other. Now, in Brisbane, they discussed their feelings, planned what they would do, and especially talked about their problems.

One of these was the meals. Nearly all the meals had meat as part of them. For breakfast there were eggs and bacon; for lunch, meat stews; and in the evening, cutlets and vegetables or salads with assorted sliced meat. Reg Smalley was indifferent. He thought meat would not worry him, but his parents would be scandalised if ever they heard he had eaten meat. Roj knew his parents would be equally shocked. Somehow—and somewhere—it was a religious matter with them. The two boys went to the camp commandant and told him their problem. That officer saw no problem at all and ordered vegetarian meals for them. No one seemed to notice the difference. Roj and Reg were both good cricketers and that made up for any small differences in their practice of life.

It was Crissie Holmes who proved to be the real problem. She was an exceptionally pretty girl, and both Reg and Roj were fascinated by her. Roj was more than simply fascinated—he was infatuated. He thought he had never seen anything, or anyone, so beautiful. It was not that he saw her at the Brisbane

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camp for the first time. He had seen her at high school, but kept his eyes averted. He would only steal looks, not daring to let her know that he thought of her, and cared for her. He felt he could never bear the embarrassment or humiliation if she should discover his infatuation. He would have died of shame if she had met this with humour, condescension or pity.

He did not know that all his years within the Co-op had been preparation for this first major event of his life. She was equally infatuated with him, but she also did not care to show it. Her father was a sergeant in the police force, and knew all about the Co-op. He knew that some of the inhabitants grew marijuana in flowerpots, and tucked it away in the thick forest if ever the police should visit the place. In fact her father often told the Co-op people that he and his colleagues were coming on an inspection visit.

The police had no special problems with the Farm, and were prepared to overlook a personal pot or two of 'pot'. What concerned them was the growing of that drug for commercial purposes, and for the most part they did not like the visitors who came into the district. They understood the moving troupe of vagrants, the drop-outs and the dole bludgers, but these did not much worry them. The force knew the mood of the tribal council, and sensed that common sense would win the day.

Crissie Holmes had a romantic view of the Co-op. Somewhere, deeply down within her, she thought it would be a good place to live, but she also knew she would never be allowed to do that. She had heard some of the hair-raising stories about the place, especially about the states of undress that had been

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there in earlier days. She was not sure she would like that sort of thing, but the romantic impression persisted.

Roj—to her—was the epitome and embodiment of all that was romantic. She had looked at him many times when he was unaware of her interest, and had decided he was for her, and she for him. She had even planned to get closer to him on the Brisbane camp. When they were to go off to the Expo together, Roj suddenly found her beside him. It all seemed to have happened by accident, and to him she seemed quite detached.

For himself there was a sudden inrush of feeling, a flood of acute embarrassment and a strong, deep yearning to keep her with him. He even thought he was fairly subtle in the way he stage-managed it.

He said to her, 'I think I've seen you at Valleyton High School. Is that right?'

She nodded and said, 'I've seen you, too. I think you're from the Co-op'.

He blushed a bit at that, not knowing what kind of reception he should expect.

She went on, a bit breathlessly, 'I'd like to come out to the Farm one day. Lots of people want to see the Farm'.

'Oh!' he said vaguely. He was thinking about her seeing their small cottage. Suddenly it seemed to his mind that his parents were not quite the kind Crissie would appreciate. He thought of their kind of clothing, their long silences, their inadequate social manners. He felt a bit ashamed of them, and yet knew he really was proud of them. It was just that Crissie mightn't understand. He thought he had better keep vague about an invitation.

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She said to him warmly and conspiratorially, 'Why don't we just keep together for the visit to the Expo? Why don't we look after each other? Brisbane's strange if you haven't been here often'.

He was amazed, delighted, stunned and confused. Strange and acceptable feelings were running through his whole body. He had not thought in terms of girls before. Even his adoration of her was something in the mind, and not at all something of the body. Now that had changed.

He stammered a bit as he said, 'Yes, I'd like that, especially if you would like it'. He was scared, now, that he would have nothing to say, that he would be tongue-tied and that she would be bored with him.

To the contrary. They suddenly found they had lots of things in common. They watched the same programs. They knew the same names. Her father was a good cricketer and she watched the Tests. He began to wonder what they didn't have in common. In the bus they sat together in a two-seater, and Roj was glad Reg Smalley had picked up with another high school girl.

The day passed as though it were an unbelievable dream. It was when time came to buy some tea that a kind of dread came to Roj. He was no longer a small boy. He was not only a large, strong boy in second year at high school, but he was hungry with it. She also was hungry. In his pocket he fingered the dollars Grandpa had given him. He knew he could afford the food they would have to buy. That did not trouble him. It was what they would buy which would trouble him.

To begin with, he would not be able to endure seeing his newfound goddess eating meat. The thought of this happening appalled him. He could not believe

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that slaughtered animal flesh could pass through those delicately shaped and beautiful lips. For her to munch part of an animal went beyond endurance. How could he persuade her to eat something vegetarian?

The other part of him did not want to lose her. He would go through fire and hell and other suchlike things just to retain her. This had been the happiest day of his life and he did not wish to destroy it. They lined up together at 'The Chicken Place'. He liked the closeness of her and the intimacy of being together in that vast crowd of noisy, jostling young people.

She said to him, because she thought he was still a bit shy, 'What about chicken 'n chips?'

He said, 'I'd like chips but not chicken'.

She said, 'What about fish and chips?'

He remembered a story his father had told him about a time when—in his travels—he was starving and a fish had washed up on the beach, and in hunger his father had cooked and eaten it. Then the terrible pain had come, and his father knew it was vengeance, retribution for eating a fish, albeit it had been washed up on the beach.

'Not fish and chips', he said, 'just a burger'.

'Ham?' she asked.

'No', he said, 'just egg or cheese or both'.

She nodded merrily. She felt proprietorial towards him. 'An egg and cheese burger', she said to the order boy.

'And for you?' asked the order boy admiringly.

'Oh!' she said thoughtfully, a slim finger upon her delicate upper lip. 'Now what will I have?'

He prayed, 'Oh, may she only have a cheese and egg burger'.

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She looked at him. 'What should I have?' she asked him.

He said, 'An egg and cheese with me'. He could say no more.

She shot him a look and laughed. 'No, I'll have a steak with onions, lettuce and all the doings. In short, I will have a jumbo burger.'

His stomach turned within him. He smiled wanly. He felt unhappy. He knew he just could not see her eat that.

It was misery whilst they waited for the orders to come.

When they did arrive he felt somewhat ill at the smell of hot-cooked steak. Of course the same smell was all around him, but her burger seemed to him to be an abomination. He knew he was rooted to the spot. He could not run away. Much depended on this moment.

His mind went back to the Valley he now knew he loved. A host of small incidents rushed up to him out of his memory. Even so, the most beautiful and amazing thing was this lovely young woman beside him, smiling as she stretched out to take the burger. He forced his hand to take the one on the right side of the throw away plate.

He saw her delicate teeth press into the burger, and her mouth close around it to twist part of it off. His adrenalin was stimulated, his pulse was quickening, and his blood was flowing faster. He looked away from the mouth he loved, and pressed his own teeth into his burger.

He felt a new taste come into his mouth. As he bit he knew it must be the taste of meat. Something dreadful had happened. They had taken the wrong burgers.

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Her eyes were laughing. Her face was merry. She chewed with delight.

'I like cheese and egg', she said, 'and I thought I never would'.

He tried to arrest his eating, but could not. Her eyes were on him.

'What a marvellous mistake!' she was crying.

If there was any compensation in her not eating meat, it was not enough to calm him. He could feel his gorge rising. Nausea seemed to flood over him. His chewing was suspended because—anyway—he was choking. He rushed out of the building to one of the rubbish bins, and tore off its lid. He felt the pain in his stomach and the dizziness in his head, and he began to retch.

Long, harsh, choking sobs came out of him, and the little he had swallowed came to the surface.

After a time he closed the bin and returned to the counter. She looked surprised.

'A gastric attack?' she asked, and he nodded. She said in a motherly way, 'Don't have any burgers then. Just have ice cream and a Coke. That'll fix you'.

Back in the Valley he tried to assess everything. Now he saw the Farm with new eyes. Whilst he was awakened critically, he was not hypercritical or censorious of all that he saw. He was simply puzzled. Matters like dress occupied his mind. In earlier days he had seen his mother naked, and thought she was beautiful in form. Now she seemed stick-like under her shapeless dress. She also seemed aged, whilst people older in age seemed younger than her. His father's heavy beard somehow seemed unreal. He often

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wished his father would shave like other men, so that for once he could see the true features of his face.

Some days their house seemed to have shrunk, and become a tiny house for elves and fairies. Even the rainforest—perhaps because it was seasonal—often seemed dry and transitory. Sometimes, when the rain withheld itself, the Farm and the forest seemed to lose its substantial nature. The waterfall would dry to a trickle, and even the fruit trees seemed to be harsh and fruitless.

He could not understand the change in himself. It was as though his heart was lost to the environment. He was more interested in persons and relationships. Crissie had lost none of her attraction for him. He was realistic enough to know she was one girl amongst many others, but although others raised tremors of interest, none of them surpassed her. He liked the way she looked at him with an intimacy that made his blood run faster, and that sense of wellbeing spread through him. In a curious way he marked her out for the future, not wanting to develop a relationship too much with her in the present.

Subjects at the high school were beginning to interest him. He liked English literature. He also was glad to learn the Indonesian language. He began to read widely. He rummaged amongst his father's books, and was surprised to discover he had an uncle who was a writer. He began to shape his own writing on this relative. He read Australian literature widely, but wondered why European and North American writers seemed to have more greatness. He wondered whether his own country had really produced great writers. He knew that they were competent enough, but he saw little of greatness.

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Once or twice he discovered stories his father had written, and he wondered why he had not published them. Perhaps they had been rejected. He did not know, but he felt an itch in his own hand to write. It was at that time that the unknown uncle had wandered in to see his bearded brother and his blond-haired nephew. He—Roj—wondered why he prickled with anger at the sight of his uncle, because he knew that in his heart he admired his writing, but there was something about him that was not admirable. Maybe it was the touch of cynicism in the voice; or an unspoken criticism of his father; or just an air of self-satisfaction which had come—perhaps— from the success of his life.

When his uncle took up shares in the Co-op and began to build, the high school boy found his resentment growing. He was surprised at how deeply he felt about the new buildings which were rising. He remembered that when he was a boy, a single mother had joined the Co-op and had lived on her own. No one had tried to help her build beyond her portable plastic dome. One day her father had appeared and, without saying a word to anyone, had built her a fine A-frame house. Having done this, he had saluted his daughter whom he loved, and left.

He remembered the furore in the tribal council. They had argued angrily that the house was an atrocity. It was an eyesore on the lovely landscape. They didn't want such unecological buildings—structures which did not melt into the landscape and become one with them.

He remembered wisps of conversation that his parents had had. They had been critical of the critics. Their human sympathy was with the single mother

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and the child. It was an almost unspoken knowledge that the real anger had been loosed at the parent who had come into the Farm to house his daughter and granddaughter. He represented all that some of them hated—interfering parenthood, paternalistic manipulation. The boy's parents had not seen it that way, but nothing they said could stem the tribal rage.

The young woman had moved off after that tribal council, vacating her house and leaving her address. They had pulled the house down within a few days, sold the materials, and sent her the money for it, along with the cash she had paid for shares in the Farm. Now, as the growing boy looked at the house his uncle was building, and at others which were being built, he remembered that the A-frame had not been any more unecological than these new homes. He acknowledged that they were functional enough, and pleasant to look at, but the old days seemed to have departed.

Vegetarianism began to wane. Interest in Eastern religions dried up. Electricity was being laid on to house after house. The innovation of their solar panel seemed weak and insignificant. His father dreamed in terms of a computer, and they also needed electricity for that. At school he was exploring the mysteries of word processors, computers and printers, and his father was pleased enough to talk with him, and patient enough to learn from his own son.

His mother wanted a washing machine. They had had a copper for heating water in the laundry, and she had scrubbed clothes in the bath. Now, that work seemed to tire her. He noticed that she sat increasingly in front of the TV screen and watched the

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soapies. But she still loved to move through her herb garden, drying out the leaves and stalks and bottling them when they were fully dehydrated. She also kept in touch with the group who called themselves 'The Seed Savers', and wrote away for seeds of old plants no longer available on the seed lists of the big horticultural firms.

His father worked for some weeks on a farm on the other side of the mountain. He had always steadfastly refused to buy a motor vehicle, and it meant hitching a ride every morning or arriving late for work on a bus, in which case he would have to work into the late evening. When he arrived home he would be tired. His brother's house raised no envy in him, but he was worried by the change in the community. There were new faces and voices in the tribal gathering, and new ideas were abroad. Strong rules had now been made to prevent vagrants wandering through the Farm, and planting themselves upon the families. The rules certainly governed the movement of these natural gipsies, but something of the old quiet spirit had gone.

Roj noticed that people spoke more clearly, more firmly. The characteristic mumbling had been replaced by the kind of talk that was businesslike. The home philosophers seemed to have died out. The part-superstitious religionists seemed to have become secularised. Even so, the soothers were still there with their massages, their healing balms, their therapies that were a strange mixture of East and West—a syncretism that appealed to the intellectual and mystical alike.

When they had their protest meetings, things were highly organised. Their gatherings were still like

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gipsy fairs—old style clothing, sales of home-grown organic vegetables and fruits, herbs, spices, nuts, dried food and the like. He liked to be with them, although now he saw their idiosyncrasies, and could find weaknesses in their arguments. He wondered at their set of moralisms, when many of them were not altogether moral. He also questioned their drugs, for he remembered a time when his parents had been vague and disoriented in their life and their thinking. At the time he had not understood them, but lately, when he saw their freshness of mind and clearer actions, he knew what inroads the drugs had made in those earlier years.

The alternate lifestyle people had grown to a life-sized lobby group. With the advent of the growing Greenpeace and similar conservationist movements, the old hippies did not seem so 'way out'. A new respectability had come to them. These older ones did not take kindly to the younger adventurers who had decided that the 1960s and 1970s represented the lifestyle they wanted but that lifestyle as it had been in the beginning. The ability to be decisive seemed to have been attained by many of the older generation of hippies, whilst the younger generation was fighting hard to be existential. Although he did not understand the mechanics of the matter, he could detect the falsity of much of the later movement. At the same time Roj marvelled that his parents still—for the most part—seemed determinedly indeterminate.

He watched his father closely as he wrote away to leaders in the Government; as he went back to reading of former years; as he tried to recapture the thinking of those times; but he detected a loss of drive, a

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leaking out of the old anger, and an unbidden maturity making its way into the stance of the former guru. Folk who had lost respect for him during the years of drug-taking now called in—off the cuff, so to speak—to see whether they could suck a little of the old wisdom from the now older man.

What he also noticed was a restless drive in his father, something akin to what he had seen—from time to time—in both grandfathers and, for that matter, in both grandmothers, who were tireless people. Doubtless they were of an old school—one which set high store by the very action of work, no matter what its goal may have been. Whereas his father had once spent much time in meditation, now he seemed happier when he was active. He liked to paint the buildings both inside and out. He tidied up the rooms where Roj's mother had been neglectful. He wrote letters, he worked at the garden. Even his mother caught some of this, and to his delight rooted out weeds without qualms. Weeds and even trees did not seem to have souls—not, anyway, as they had before.

Whilst these changes were taking place at home, changes were also taking place as he came to his final year of high school. He and his parents were talking about what might happen in his next year—whether it should be university in Newcastle or New England, in Sydney or even in Canberra. His grades were unusually good at school. His participation in sports had lifted him high in the regard of his class year. He himself was bewildered with the rapidly changing ideas within himself. He readily acknowledged that he was confused. He was a person who had grown up in the Co-op, absorbed its ideas, liked its culture and held to its tenets. He still thought peace was the

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greatest attainment the world could achieve in this century, that the world owed much to nature, and ought to pay its debt in the renewal of rainforests in the right care of the world's fauna as well as its flora. He also clung to his vegetarian ideas. The thought of killing still sickened him. He could not forget the incident of the night when he took the wrong burger at 'The Chicken Place' in Brisbane.

His confusion lay in the fact that all that he held to, in considered loyalty, still did not, nevertheless, reveal the purpose of life to him, and he could not bear to think that life was a mere coming and going upon the earth. All the things to which he was loyal were by no means the whole matter or the true matter. There must be much more. Somehow he had gained the idea that man mattered even more than the whole of nature, although he knew that nature, itself, included man. Somehow he had sensed there must be destiny, but he could find no clue to it except that, for him, it was essential for making sense of being on the planet.

He tried to puzzle his way through his dilemma and predicament in the couple of months before he would leave the Farm. He had thoughts of talking with his father, but the miracle had happened, and his father now had a computer and printer. Nothing seemed to be able to drag him away from it. At first he had been fascinated by the sheer mechanics of the program, but then, when the machine had opened to him a quick world of writing, his spirit seemed to have been captured. There, in the Valley of the Fall, he seemed to be re-energised. The mass of thoughts

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which had been accumulating for years, the experiences he had had in his roamings around Australia before meeting Liz in the Co-op, and the advent of Roj in his life, seemed to be the materials he could now use in his writing. The fact that none of it would be lost on bits of paper and unfiled sheets of notes motivated him to begin what once he thought he had relinquished for ever—the outpouring of his mind, his view of humanity, his understanding of the anger which had embittered him and driven him into escape through drugs—all of these things began to rush up at him, and he knew he had to write, to paint and so to communicate.

The grown boy understood this, and left his father alone. One thing happened, however, which was to colour his thinking. It was the visit of Sergeant Holmes to the Farm. This time he had not warned the community, but they seemed to have nothing to hide. He, anyway, was not looking or inspecting. He had brought his daughter Crissie with him, and the day was to be a holiday for her, a quiet investigation into the Farm itself.

Roj saw her alight from the police car, and come across the kikuyu turf. For a moment he felt ashamed of their little bush home, but his mind hardened against that kind of thinking, and he went to greet her. Holmes was warm enough, and Roj called to his parents, who emerged and greeted their old friend. Crissie stood back a little until her father called her forward and introduced her to the boy's parents. Roj kept looking at her as though seeing her freshly, and liking this sighting better than former ones. His heart gave the old leap, skipping a beat or two, and setting up the old tremors in his flesh. He kept wondering

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about this woman, and what she was, and why she could disturb him so much.

He liked showing Crissie around whilst the Sergeant stayed back with his parents and talked with them. He was surprised at his interpretations of the Co-op, the people who lived there, the things of the past and the new things of the present. For his sixteen years he felt himself to be quite old, and he sensed that in many ways Crissie was so much younger in her thinking, although not in her years.

They talked about the year to come. Crissie was going to learn nursing at a College of Advanced Education, and move towards her degree. He still wasn't sure, but he would have to make up his mind. To begin with he would do Arts, and then widen out when he had found his feet. However it was not vocation which made them so much one. It was their unspoken conviction that their lives were to be in union one day. Neither expressed the thought openly, but it was implied in the way in which they talked. Nothing that he shared with her regarding the Farm seemed to worry her. He knew she now saw little romance in it all, but he also knew she wanted to understand it, perhaps in order to understand him better.

When she and her father were leaving, she first hugged him. He felt the fullness and maturity of her, and longed for her. She sensed that, and held him more tightly. Her father shook hands and opened the door to seat her. There were waves from all and she was gone. His father seemed about to say something, but suddenly remembered he had not saved the script on the computer, and hastened away. His mother drifted off and stood looking up the Valley as though

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she had lost something and was trying to find it, though without much hope.

His mother seemed apprehensive at his departure. She rarely looked at the TV screen, nor for that matter did she inhabit the garden very much. She seemed as bewildered as he was. He found himself talking to her, but she seemed so full of regrets for the past that he could not get her to think in the present. He knew her world was changing since the things she had once rejected were becoming part of the new culture of the Co-op, and so she rarely attended the tribal council meetings. Like her husband, she had been caught up in a nameless anger in her youth, a restless desire to get back at the world which had tried to conform her to its images. Yet the images she had developed as a substitute did not seem to have satisfied her. This was part of her present confusion. She also found it difficult to understand her son—so far removed from her he now appeared to be, although for his part he ached for her.

Much as he would rather have called her, 'Mother', he used the old pet name, 'Liz'.

He said, 'Liz, what about us going up through the bush to the Fall? What about us sitting up there as we used to do, looking down on the Farm, and having our old dreams?'

The steady walk and toil up the Fall brought back old memories. She was younger in her step. Some of her ideas kept floating back. She was surprised at her knowledge of the different trees, and was glad to be able to remind him of their names. He, for his part, was polite and affectionate. He helped her up some of the high rocks, even though she was capable herself

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of climbing. She liked his strong arm on her elbow and let him assist.

When they finally arrived at the head of the Valley, they were glad to rest in their old place by the Fall. They looked down at the Farm, picking out the groves and the miniature houses, detecting the orchards and gardens. They even saw miniature figures walking about. The faint noise of cars coming down the mountain road came to their ears, but even that died away, and there was only silence.

Neither really wanted to speak. The silence was what they had come to love in the old days. In the silence you could think. Just to be in it seemed almost an end in itself.

For her the years were rolling back and she saw herself as a child. She knew that all around her had been security, if only she had accepted it. She knew that her parents had been genuine. Why then had she become so angry?

She turned her head sideways, looking at his strong profile. Her heart gave a leap. She had never thought about it before. Why, she had brought him into the world and shaped him. She had helped to make him what he now was. She knew that what he was was as yet unspoiled, and she had the sense that he would never be spoiled. A deep sense of satisfaction and of gratitude began to move through her being. She knew that Harry—for all his silences and all his self-preoccupation—had also helped to train the lad. The strange thing was that neither had tried. She knew that she and Harry were deeply proud of their son. He had kept the trust they had given him, though they had not verbalised it. He had respected them although he had disagreed with many of their ideas.

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He had seen their foibles, their angers and arguments, and yet he had not altered in his love for them. As a child he had seemed to distance himself from them, but in these last days it was they who had distanced themselves from him. Perhaps it was because she and Harry had let a gulf come between them—a gulf that had kept widening. In her misery she had not sought the union that a man and a woman can have. She felt the tears close to the surface, and then, in a moment, they flowed as a renewed fall sends its waters through a valley. She thought the gulf might dissolve, and they would know love again, or even as they had never known it.

He said nothing, but he knew why they had journeyed up to the Fall. He made a movement, as though to leave, but instead he looked down into the Valley. Suddenly he saw the Valley did not matter. What his parents and the community had tried to make it did not matter either. The associations they had woven about it did not create a Valley of their fashioning. The Valley was itself, just as he was himself, and Crissie was her own person. The Co-op had used the Valley, but before they had come, others had done the same. The old farmers—in their succession—had done just that, and at the end they had become tired and let the new people come and possess it. One did not have to regret the past—not in any way.

It was then he knew he would never possess anything, and that he did not have to take anything to himself. It was borne upon him swiftly and surely that Crissie would become his wife, yet not to be possessed, but to be loved. Any union he would

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have with another human being must be without possessing that one. So he could love this Valley for itself, and not for its associations with the Co-op. Such things would come, and then they would go, but destiny was greater than them. He began to see that men, in their tribes and nations, seek to shape their environment according to their own images of what they think is true and best, or convenient and profitable, but that the 'shape' may have little to do with what is the reality. It is the reality men should seek, and not the shapes of it which they devise.

He did not understand his own destiny, but he was glad it was not ruled by fate. He had not come into this Valley by chance, through the Boyer birth, as a tiny infant running around naked, loving the water and the platypus, running his hand along the carpet snake, or giggling when the bandicoots ran over his half-sleeping body. The garden, the vegetables and herbs, the fruit and the foliage were all part of the movement of his life. His gradual emergence from acts of living into conscious knowing, and his sight of the cavalcade of life—his father, his mother, his grandparents, his friends and Crissie—all these made sense now, although how he did not know.

Nor did he have to know. He could leave the Valley without regrets, and he could return without them, also. It was not that nothing really mattered. All things mattered, of course, but one did not have to know why or how. A Sovereignty beyond him held the answer, and that Sovereignty was the source of all that had happened, and would happen, to him.

His mother's arm seemed cold in the later afternoon. She was still trembling a little, but she seemed quite happy. He thought, 'If only Harry my father

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would come away from his computer and welcome us as we come home, that would mean a lot to my mother, and to me'.

He thought about it as they tumbled and slipped and walked and travelled towards the small bush house with its half-surround of kikuyu turf, and its other half-surround of the garden and the fruit trees. To his surprise and delight he saw his father emerge from the old shack and computer room, and look up in the direction of the Fall, as though he hoped they were returning.

When he caught a glimpse of them he raised his hand in recognition and salute, beckoning to them to come, and he found that his mother—as she had never done before—was running, running towards his father and crying, 'Harry! Oh Harry!', and he, himself, was running alongside her, although she seemed even more fleet of foot than he.

She kept running, and he, too, kept running, and both were running towards Harry, who—although he rarely ran—suddenly seemed to understand, and in a moment he was running towards them. So they kept at it, shouting and crying somewhat, and all the time running.

The Frisbee Family

The Frisbee Family

THE MAN in the first family was a child psychologist. He worked in Family Welfare and his name was Frank Lyall. He was a bright-eyed man with grey hair and unusually handsome features. He loved children deeply, almost too deeply to be very objective about his work. However, far from impeding his work, this seemed to add to it, to enhance it. Parents liked the kindly look in his alert and sympathetic eyes, and found themselves listening to all he had to say. They would go away and act on his advice. Well, nearly all would act on the advice. Those who did found—for the most part—that it worked.

The Government was pleased with Frank Lyall. Leastways, the head of the Department of Family Welfare was pleased, and he even filed a good report. In this sense, the future of this family counsellor was settled. For the departmental head, Frank constituted a genuine joy. There was little about family life and relationships that he did not know.

At this moment Frank was making his way into Fairfield Park. The park, as you may know, overlooks the Brisbane River. It is a well-grassed park with

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sweeping undulations. The grass is green couch, buttressed by excellent watering against the hot summer. The children love to run up its slopes and then run pell-mell down them, or even turn on their sides and roll down, over and over and over again, shrieking as they do so, hoping the adults and others will notice them.

Frank helped Josie his wife with the cooler. It was large, made of white polystyrene foam, and with a close-fitting lid. In it were the goodies being kept cool against the Brisbane sun. Also he had rugs draped over his shoulders, and he was grasping in the other hand a heavy beach umbrella. Behind him trailed Ainslie, aged six. Ainslie was holding on to one pants-leg of his father. The youngster was half skipping, half running. He had an abstract air about him. He might have been dreaming. He was also sucking a thumb.

Josie Lyall was a nervous, unhappy woman. She seemed perpetually distraught. Life was bitter, no doubt. It had its problems. One problem was Ainslie and another was Frank her husband. She knew it was her task in life to handle husband and son so that they fitted her models of fatherhood, husbandhood and childhood. The trouble was that she had never thought much about the origins of these models. She was a simple woman. She just knew what Frank should be and what he should do. Likewise she knew what Ainslie should be and do.

Both these males kept escaping. She would have them within the mould, even if only for a fleeting second. Then they would suddenly escape, forming patterns of their own. Her frustration would lead to anger and this to infantile pettishness. She would

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frown. Her well-formed features would compress into unnecessary wrinkles and her eyes would glower. At the moment, this was what was happening.

She was chiding the boy. 'Don't cling to your father! Let go his trouser leg! How can he walk and carry those things with you holding on to him?'

The two males, being used to this sort of talking, had developed a protective immunity to it. They were impervious to it in a gracious, kindly way. Without agreeing, they would generally humour her. However this morning the little boy felt insecure. Other families were also making their way towards the barbecue area. The little boy felt threatened by so many children and parents. In a few moments he would have to relate to them all, and he knew he had neither the ability nor the desire. His hands gripped his dad's pants-leg more firmly, and he sucked deliberately and juicily upon his thumb.

The latter action enraged the fretting woman. 'Stop sucking your thumb', she said sharply. 'It's disgusting for a boy of your age.' It was as though he had not heard. He kept staring at the impending crowd.

There was not only one picnic, but many. One group had set itself up with a large marquee. Also it had tables and chairs set around the western side of the barbecue area. Some adult males were showing their natural competency in collecting twigs and branches of the eucalypts. They were also fragmenting the dried bark, making it into excellent kindling. It was too early in the day for the barbecue, but in an hour or so they would light it.

There were two clowns, one male and one female. They kept joshing each other in a friendly manner, and saying things which caused the children nearby

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to go into shrieks of laughter. Someone was handing out wedge-shaped ices on sticks. The children were lined up to receive them, and behind them were the adults.

The boy would have liked to surrender himself to it all, but he did not know how. He knew the worth of his father, and was puzzled that such fatherhood could not come through fully. He was dimly aware of his mother's insecurity. Somehow it impeded the flow of his father to him, and of him to his father. He knew that underneath her angry impatience his mother loved him, but then he feared her love. In rare moments she had grasped him, hugging him to herself, breathing fiercely, only to let him go as she hurried off to some imaginary task.

They settled on the side of the hill. Rugs were spread. The cooler was set down. The beach umbrella was slotted into the firm turf. Everything was made orderly because that was the way Josie wished it to be.

Then the man and the boy began to play. They played tag together. The father would run after the boy, never quite catching up to him, and the boy would shriek with the sheer delight of being missed time and again. Suddenly father Frank would whip around a tree, his bright eyes shining, his hands held high like some predator, and the little boy would tremble with delicious terror. Almost, almost his father had caught him. Off they would scamper, his father shouting with huge threatening, 'I'm after you! I'll catch you!'

There was an end to Josie's tolerance. When they knocked over a carton of milk, she told them to stop it. They were somewhat exhausted so they lay down on the rugs, breathless and panting.

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After a time they sat up. Others of their group had arrived, and they greeted them cheerfully. Even Ainslie ceased to feel threatened. He was warm and relaxed. The fun had stirred his blood. He smiled at the other children.

Suddenly he saw the bilycarts. There they were on the flat, three of them, and they were special billy-carts at that. The fathers had helped the sons to make them. The one painted in gold was almost a miniature car, but even so it was a bilycart. Like the others, it had large wheels so that the chassis was well clear of the ground. It was also long, built so obviously for speed. It may have been light, but it looked to be strong. There was another painted blue, and one painted letterbox red. The boys were pulling them here and there, showing off in their pride of possession.

Frank thought, 'He's old enough now for a billy-cart. We'll build one together'.

Josie could tell by his eyes that he was thinking this. She said sharply, 'We'll never have one of those things around our place. They're too dangerous'.

The man and the boy sat in silence. They did not know whether or not she was sincere, so they let the nagging flow over them. They just kept looking greedily at the bilycarts.

Then the event happened, the event that the man and the boy were never to forget. The woman did not notice it. Of course, she could not avoid seeing it, but then it did not register in her mind as anything of significance.

The happening was quite simple, really. It was merely a family throwing a frisbee. Frank knew the family. They were a run-of-the-mill family. Mum,

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dad, and five children; two of the children were girls and, of course, three of them boys. They had formed a fairly large circle. They were tossing the frisbee to one another. First they tossed it around the circle. It was quite breathtaking. The symmetry was superb. The throwing was effortless. They stood erect, but gracefully. When the yellow disc reached each one, he or she would flow towards it, receive it simply, and then send it flowing out to the next member of the family. The father had exactly the same rate of thrust as the others. It was a circle of equal action. Although their body heights differed, their abilities were parallel. On and on went the frisbee, from one to the other. None ever dropped it. No hiatus impeded the remarkable flow. None fumbled. On and on went the frisbee.

Frank Lyall watched it with incredible joy. He had never seen the true unity of a family more clearly demonstrated. But then this was no deliberate demonstration. The real beauty of it was that it was wholly unconscious. It was a perpetual rhythm of unself-conscious unity. It was a quiet, gracious harmony.

Nearby, Josie was giving vent to her tired sighs. Her hands were straying nervously across the rug on which she was seated. She looked out, staring blankly, seeing nothing. In fact her look was bleak and negative. By contrast, Ainslie was watching, his fascinated gaze fixed on the family, and it seemed his stare would never come unstuck. His head unconsciously turned, moving with the flow of the frisbee, he was sensing the intimate harmony of the family.

Something broke the spell. His gaze shifted to the bilycarts, and the magic of the frisbee dissipated. His eyes looked longingly at his father, who was still

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spellbound by the hurtling frisbee. He watched with admiration, and something of family hunger was in his eyes.

The boy said wistfully, 'Dad, can we go to the billy-carts?'

He heard that—the father—and said, 'All right, son. Let's go'.

Josie complained. 'Why don't we sit together? Why let the boy hurt himself?' Her negativity had reached out to the bilycarts and the boys on the flat.

The two slipped away from her and the imprisoning words. They sauntered at first, and then, as though at a given signal, flew down the hill, their bodies leaning as they went. Their arms were spread outwards and upwards. If their bodies were not flying fully, then in their minds they were flying.

They were greeted with shrill cries by the other boys, and adult nods of recognition by the fathers. As yet no one had pulled the bilycarts up the hill before their run down to the flat.

The two of them surrendered to all things of this picnic day. They could hear the two clowns shouting at each other through hailers. Children of the other picnic were gathering for races, skinny-legged in cloven shorts, or chesty in their T-shirts. At the barbecue centre, men were beginning to light their fires. A few had donned aprons. Some were of white material. Others were green or grey, and one man had a brilliant red apron. He also wore a Coca-Cola cap, but back to front, its peak sheltering his neck.

They watched the bilycarts dragged to the top of the hill. They heard the sharp command of the racing steward. The next moment the machineless vehicles came down the hill, thrusting themselves with their

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own weight and the gathering momentum. The white-tired wheels spun merrily, and the drivers steered as the vehicles swayed from side to side. Below, on the flat, the watching children were screaming themselves hoarse, whilst fathers were watching anxiously, trying to cover their natural pride. They were hoping, each of them, for family victory.

Ainslie was wistful. He would have loved to own a billycart, but he knew he was too small for that. He gripped his father's hand as the hurtling carts thundered towards him. Then they were past, splaying out from the centre of the grass track. Then they had stopped and other children were demanding a chance to drive them. Somehow the confusion resolved itself, and different fathers were dragging the vehicles up the hill.

Miraculously it became Ainslie's turn. He had watched for an hour, refusing to budge from his standing position. His heart pounded when they offered him the golden billycart. His dad's eyes glowed with his. They made their way up the hill, he panting to reach the top.

The men settled him in, giving instructions. He kept nodding, for he understood fully. The boys in the other two vehicles were older and impetuous. They were impatient of the advice, wanting only to get away and be in the glory of the racing. The steward smiled at them in a kindly way, raised his right hand and, with a flick of a thumb and finger, gave the sharp word of release.

Away they went, merrily, the spokes twinkling until they became a blur. The carts rolled and rattled and gathered speed. Their front wheels were like

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revolving eyes, staring out at the grass as they raced over the sloping turf.

Frank Lyall tried to keep pace with the boy's vehicle, and he had to run quickly to effect this. He had forgotten the watching woman on the hill. He was in parallel with the hurtling cart, and as he ran he was like the father with the frisbee. He was one with his son. They were both voiceless, but beneath it all they were holding a conversation in harmony.

The woman on the hill was beating the grass with both hands. Hysterical fear had gripped her. Suddenly, idiotically, she was shouting to them both to come back to her. This they could not do. She knew that this was what they would not do. She hated the competency of the grey-headed father. She had tried to imprison him within herself, but had not succeeded. Long ago—loving her—he had seen she was her own prisoner. Now they were both escaping her forever, fleeing away over the sloping turf.

'He'll get killed!' she screamed, and in a strange, quick moment it seemed she were a prophetess. She had risen, her hair flowing out from her shoulders, her regular features tensed and stern and wild. Her arms were up in the air, and folk looking upwards saw her silhouetted against the pure blue of the sky.

She shouted it again: 'He'll get killed', and in that moment one of the carts—the blue one—slewed and touched the golden vehicle. It slewed also for a moment and then tipped, its momentum carrying it on its side for a few yards. Then it fell on its driver, and slid over him, coming to a stop, its white wheels spinning freely.

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The man rushed across, lifting the vehicle as though it were paper. The boy lay still.

Men began running uphill. The steward threw himself down the hill. Idiotically indifferent, the two clowns went on hailing each other, funning it to the laughter of the children. The children of the billycart picnickers had no laughter. Some of them stood frozen. They were one with the rest of the human race, anticipating tragedy.

The woman would not come down the hill. She stood beating her hands together. She was crying out to her husband, castigating him. He heard her words as he rolled the boy over, feeling his body, trying to restore consciousness.

It was a moment, only, before the boy revived. His eyes stared in bewilderment at his father. Quickly he looked around, and joy shone in his eyes as he saw the golden cart. Someone had restored it to the upright position.

'Can I have another go, Dad?' he asked.

He knew he couldn't. He knew that was not allowed. He was not deeply disappointed. He smiled, rubbed his head and stood up. A sigh was released from the anxious crowd. Some of the men nodded their heads. The children were clamouring for the three bilycarts. Suddenly there was no tragedy. Everyone knew that tragedy was only temporary anyway. Life was what was permanent. It alone mattered.

They made their way up the hill. The boy was six years of age, the man forty-two. Both knew what was ahead of them, but they also knew how to cope. They accepted the alarm, the vituperation, the self-pity, the tears and the wild look. They loved her—come wind,

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come weather—but she could not see this. She was unable to understand.

He understood. He knew her parents. He knew she could never receive a frisbee from her father or mother. They would not know how to throw one, much less receive one. He wished he did not know the 'why' of her condition. Perhaps then he would be able to help her. The others were not difficult to help.

They sat under the tirade. After a time, they helped to set out the meal. The man went down with the steak and the beef sausages to the barbecue. Other men cooked the meat for him, adding some special sauce as the meat turned brown and then almost black. He took the meat up the hill on paper plates. They set salad about the three plates, and began eating.

Folk came and offered sympathy and help. The woman took a couple of Disprins. She seemed to enjoy the concern of the others. That was until Frank slipped back and knocked over the carton of milk again. She sobbed with anger and would not be consoled. She refused a fresh unopened carton offered by a large and sympathetic woman. Her tears blinded her as she stumbled up from the rug, half running towards the car. She sat in the front seat, next to the driver's place. When the tears dried she just sat, staring ahead, seeing nothing. Even her thinking was anaesthetised.

The boy and the man sat on the milk-stained rug. They chewed quietly on their steak and sausages. They drank orange cordial. There was nothing of resentment in their spirits. There was some sorrow for the woman who was both wife and mother. They knew she just did not understand. One day, they hoped, she would understand.

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The frisbee family had broken up. That is, they had ceased their game in order to have lunch. They had cooked their meatballs, sausages and lamb cutlets at the barbecue, and had returned. They were a fairly quiet family, saying little whilst they were eating. After the meal they lay under the eucalypts. One or two of them slept.

The clowns were busy handing out ice-creams. There was no need, really, to use the hailers, but every so often one of the clowns would put his lips to the instrument and call the stragglers for an ice-cream. These were in wrappers, of course.

The frisbee family woke up after a time and re-formed the family circle. The father was a quiet, thin man, dark of complexion. He rarely spoke. His wife was a fine-looking woman, and had kept her figure well, considering the number of children.

The father watched them take up their positions and then cried out, 'OK, everybody?'

'OK, Dad!' they responded.

He threw the frisbee to the oldest boy, who threw it on to the youngest boy. So it went around the circle, skilfully passed from person to person. Frank and the boy Ainslie marvelled at the precision of the throwing, the skill of the catching and, above all, the effortlessness which must have taken much practice and patience.

Back in the car, the woman was beginning to lose her sightlessness. Looking across, she could see the man and the boy sitting together. She noticed how close they were. She liked it, even in her envy. The two, she saw, were gazing at the frisbee family. She had not consciously seen them before, but now they roused her interest.

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She watched the amazing coordination they exhibited in throwing and receiving. The frisbee was yellow and therefore easily seen. Between each two players it would rise and fall, establishing a rhythm as it passed from person to person. She was amazed that it was never fumbled, never dropped. In spite of herself, her admiration grew. The faint—almost frightening—thought drifted into her mind. What if she and Frank and Ainslie were to try it out, and even practise?

The thought was retained. She leaned forward, peering.

Frank and Ainslie, for their part, were watching with delight. They scarcely noticed the arrival of the woman Josie, as she came up to them and sat beside them. They had thought of her remaining in the car, sitting in the front seat, staring sightlessly ahead.

They marvelled, the three of them, at the symmetry of the throwing, the fluent movements of the frisbee and, of course, the unself-conscious harmony of the quiet family.

The Cricket Match

YOU'VE seen some cricket matches in your day, I bet. Probably some of you can remember back as far as Clarrie Grimmett, but perhaps not Hobbs. I can remember Don Bradman very well. He was a young man when I was a boy. I can remember writing to him and asking for an autographed photograph. To my immense surprise and delight, he sent me one. I was the envy of my schoolmates and my local cricketing friends.

We had cricketing obsession. No sooner were we home from school than we were out on the local pitch. No sooner were Saturday morning chores finished—mowing the lawns and cutting the edges—than we were out on the pitch again. Most of us were sure we would be Test players, although that never eventuated. Of course not every boy gets his break in life. If I had had my 'break', then I don't doubt my brilliance as a Test player would have shown forth!

What some of us wanted to do, when we were grown, married and had families, was to get our sons to do what we had not been able to achieve, due to force of circumstances, not getting the desired break, and possibly to not being Test quality material,

although the latter is difficult to believe, let alone accept.

For some of us, one of the deepest sorrows of being fathers was to find that our sons had decided to skip a generation in cricket obsession. They scarcely noticed the game was being played. They had other interests. With a trifle of sadness, a gulp or two and some steeling of ourselves, we accepted this gloomy fact. None of us dreamed that it is often the grandchildren who repeat the things of the grandfatherly generation.

I mention these simple and insignificant things so that you may more fully appreciate the resurgence of cricket in the next-but-one generation. For obvious reasons, I tell the story in the third person.

It was all very exciting. Young Timmy—aged seven—Timmy's dad and mum, and young Kathryn—aged about two—were going to visit Grandpa and Nanna in the Adelaide Hills. This happened every so often, and Timmy would have liked it to be more often. He had memories of winter evenings and the great logs on the hearth fire, of books and books and books, and then the toys they could litter over the large living room. In spring and summer there were no end of strawberries and the like. Grandpa also had lots of exciting birds, and once he (Grandpa) and John—a friend and neighbour—had built young Timmy an aviary. Now it was bright with ceaselessly chattering zebra finches and a few budgies.

Timmy chattered too. When excited, he could beat any zebra finch or budgie. He could leave them standing. But now he, Timmy, had many things to do. First he must put in his two cricket bats, the

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yellow plastic one, and the more grown-up wooden one with the spring handle. Of course, there were the stumps and the fixed bails. Mustn't forget the ball, eh? So Timmy didn't forget the ball.

He rushed inside to get his cricketing book. This book told all about cricket—how to stand at the crease, handle the bat, face the bowler, be careful of the field. It also told how to bowl, how to stop a ball and all the other things he had seen on TV.

Voices were telling him to hurry. Mum had put a few good things in to help with the lunch, although Nanna didn't need all that much help. She could prepare quite nice lunches if it came to that.

They were in their new car, all blue and shiny and smelling good, and feeling comfortable. They stopped at the stationers to get something, and Timmy bought some cricket cards. There were all the famous men like Allan Border, Wayne Daniels, Rodney Hogg and others. There was also one of Imran Khan. He looked very confident.

Dad drove carefully as usual, up the winding Hills road, and the view from Windy Point—if you were quick—was really good. You could see Adelaide set out well on every side. The most winding of all the roads in the Hills was the one to Grandpa's place.

It was quite exciting getting out of the car and seeing Nanna and Grandpa. After the usual kisses and hugs there was the large living room, and Kathryn going straight to the storybooks, crying to her Nanna, 'Tory! Tory!', meaning, 'I want a story read to me'. Dad took her aside whilst Timmy excitedly produced his cricket cards.

He held his thumb over the names. 'Guess who that cricketer is, Grandpa', he insisted.

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Grandpa pretended for a moment or two that he didn't know, and screwed up his eyes as though that would make him see better or remember better. Slowly he guessed all the names, and every one was correct.

'Grandpa', said Timmy with sudden seriousness, 'will you help to bring in my cricket gear?'

Together they brought in the important gear. Then Grandpa said brightly, 'I guess we had better have a game of cricket after lunch, don't you think?'

Timmy thought, all right. He thought it was a very good idea. He could scarcely wait until the lunch was finished, delicious as it was, there being lobster salad, with plenty of potato chips, watermelon, preserved fruit and multicoloured ice cream. All Kathryn wanted was watermelon. She kept on wanting it, and cried when the adults said she had had enough. Kathryn could never have enough watermelon.

Then it was time to go to the cricket game. Timmy had run down to the playing field, but not before the arrangements were made. Because Kathryn was too small to play, she had to stay with Nanna while the dishes were washed and dried. The game needed a good organiser, and Timmy thought he could do that.

'We all have to have special names', he said. 'We must have the names of good cricketers.' His eyes shone. 'We need two captains, eh?' They all agreed that two captains were needed. Timmy began to get excited. 'I say that I be one captain and Daddy be the other. Then we must pick our teams.'

He certainly was excited. He kept jumping around as he thought of the beautiful match which would soon be played. 'I vote Grandpa be on my team and

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Mummy be on Daddy's side.' Mummy and Daddy exchanged looks, and accepted the decision of their son.

'I'm Allan Border', said Timmy, and he looked at Grandpa. 'Who will you be, Grandpa?'

Grandpa thought quickly and said, 'Keppler Wessels'.

Then Daddy and Mummy had to think hard, and suddenly Daddy was Kim Hughes so that there were two captains, and Mummy became Rodney Hogg, or 'Hoggy', as we call him.

The next thing was to go down to the playing area and talk about where the wicket should be. That was soon done, and in no time a merry game of cricket was under way. The toss had been won by Timmy, who decided that his team should bat first. So they batted. Because it was a strange wicket, and it took a lot of thinking to be a captain, Allan Border got out after one. Never mind. Grandpa would help a bit, probably.

And he did. He got nineteen, even against the fierce bowling of that devil Rodney Hogg, and that clever Kim Hughes. Then he was bowled and the whole team was out. Allan Border then led his men on to the field. He undertook to lead the bowling attack. His bowling was pretty good, although once or twice there was something that looked like a wide. Rodney Hogg batted well for his (her) team, and knocked up a reasonable score.

Then it was Kim Hughes' turn. It was one of Hughes' better days. He hit balls here and there, causing great excitement as the field tried to get him out. It wasn't all that easy. Stumping is hard, and Hughes kept crying out 'Crease!'

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Allan Border was keeping the score pretty well. 'Fifteen to go', he would say, and a bit later, 'Fourteen to go'. And so on.

It was going to be a pretty close thing. Keppler Wessels seemed in fairly good bowling form, and yet Hughes was batting well. It began to get very exciting. Border would cry out, 'Five to go, four to go, three to go!' and everyone was holding his (her) breath, then suddenly, with a great underarm yorker, Wessels' ball hit Hughes' wicket, knocking off the bails.

'Oh!' shouted Allan Border, 'that's it. We have beaten Sri Lanka!'

And so they had. It may seem strange to some that Hogg and Hughes were playing for Sri Lanka, but sometimes in cricket you have to do that sort of thing. Cricket is a great game.

We repeat, 'Cricket is a great game!'. Oh, yes, it is ! Border was pretty proud as he led his team off the field. The great crowd roared its applause, and Border was smiling and waving to those in the pavilion. Keppler Wessels was quite proud to be led by his captain Allan Border, and he also waved. At the same time the Sri Lankan players were not depressed. After all, the Australians had only won by three runs, and it had been a good game.

A very good game. Timmy was quite delighted when Grandpa said they had better have another game soon, on the playing oval. Grandpa looked a bit exhausted by the whole game, but then he was not a young man, not like Timmy Leeder-Allan Border. But then you can't expect grandpas to be quite as good as their grandsons.

After the match, Nanna and Kathryn came. It was a pity they had to wash up, and miss the thrilling

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game, but sometimes it has to be that way. Nanna had been reading stories to Kathryn, so that made up for it a bit. Also the two teams—along with Nanna and Kathryn—went for a walk to see the new building. Perhaps the new building would turn into a splendid pavilion for the spectators. You never knew. Anything can happen in the Hills, and there was Grandpa so excited and saying, 'We'd better have another game one day, hey?'

Timmy thought that was a good idea. They went up to the white house to have a drink. A strenuous match makes you quite thirsty, and no drinks had been brought out on to the Oval, which, when you think about it, was a bit strange. After the drinks, preparations were made for going home.

Soon Border, Hughes and Hogg were in the Bluebird with little Kathryn, and were speeding towards home. Timmy kept thinking about the match and the puzzling idea of being both Timmy and Captain Allan Border, but then that was not too difficult to understand. All the time he kept thinking about the match, and also about the next match they would soon be playing.

Grandpa, seated in his Jason rocker—back at the white house—was wondering whether one day Timmy might be a Test star, and even reach the giddy heights of captaining the Test team. Still in the Bluebird, Timmy was wondering much the same thing, which shows you that there is really no generation gap in these matters.

Then Grandpa thought what a wonderful life he had had, *not* being a Test cricketer. The thought had not struck him before: he had always held regrets that the circumstances of life—especially the outbreaking

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of world war—had been the things preventing him from reaching that coveted position of Test cricketer. Now he wondered why he had ever wanted to be a famous cricketer. What was in it, anyway, when you thought about it?

This new idea was so novel that Grandpa really relished it. He savoured it, ruminating, chewing the cud of it with delight. For goodness sake! He had done very well without being a special Test cricketer, thank you very much! He even got to the point where he became sorry for Test players who have to go through all that rigmarole about manners, clothes, travelling, changeable moods of fickle crowds and all the rest.

In fact, Grandpa began to glow at having got out of the whole business. He was quite jubilant, chuckling away there in his comfy Jason rocker. He rocked, he tilted, he lay back. He began chortling. Nanna thought he must have been going over the cricket match in his mind. She concentrated on the rather difficult pattern she was working on for patchwork quilting. For his part, Grandpa felt like clapping and clapping. Instead he fell into a snooze, a delicious, cosy and comfy snooze.

Strangely enough, as the Bluebird brought Timmy closer to his Adelaide suburban home, he also was feeling tired. The motion of the vehicle helped him to drowse. Just at the back of his thoughts was the memory of the great match they had just played. Without realising it, he was asleep. His mum thought he was quite a handsome little fellow.

Back in the Hills, her mum was looking across at her dad and thinking, 'Well, for a man of his age, he isn't all that bad looking'.

The Strange Case of Caraby Quinn

THE STORY of Caraby Quinn is indeed a strange one; in fact Caraby Quinn himself was a strange one. I can remember standing in the line when we were at the Recruiting Depot in the Royal Showground in Sydney. Quinn was the man ahead of me. He said little to anyone. If anything, he seemed a bit nervous, but I reckoned he was just withdrawn into himself. In that detail I was right, as events proved. Not that it was easy to come to conclusions about Quinn, because when you made them, and they became firm, then Quinn would do something normal and natural, and you would be uneasy at the way in which you had assessed him.

Even at that time of recruitment, when you thought you had him summed up as being quite unaware of you, he would suddenly smile and look at you as though he thought you were a bit special, even though he had only just met you. I remember him saying to me, 'Do you like birds? I mean, do you like parrots?'

That was a strange question, but I nodded. My mind wasn't on parrots. It was on the mad German dictator, and Europe falling around our ears—so to speak.

'Yes', I said, humouring him, 'I like parrots all right'.

'Nothing wrong with parrots', he said suddenly. 'They're great in fact.' After that he lapsed back into silence, fell back into himself.

Caraby Quinn never looked to be much of a soldier. He was about medium height, a bit thin and mostly absent in his stare, as though he was not with the present moment. His mind would be somewhere else. He rarely seemed keen about the drill or the food. He would stand listlessly, staring into space or receding into himself.

On that recruiting day he signed his life away to the army, but I made an inward bet that they would never get him—not Quinn himself—and in that I proved to be right. They gave him his gigue suit, and his uniform, and all the gear that is standard army private issue, but it made no impression on him. Nothing seemed to make much impression.

It was my luck to become Quinn's corporal. I was discipline proud: I was smart at drilling the troops. Also I was a Physical Training and Boxing instructor. I liked that sort of thing. Also I liked soccer.

Caraby Quinn didn't take to drill as a duck takes to water. Oh, no! He ignored drill. He also ignored PT exercises. He wouldn't lift a hand to box. He was late for nearly every movement. He would have come to attention when the others had gone on to 'stand at ease' and then he would be standing at ease when the others were 'standing easy'.

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But the crazy thing was that Quinn was not consistent. One day he would get it into his head to drill well. He would jump to it, and even be a fraction ahead of the other troops. He would be quick to salute, and his salute would leave you a bit breathless. He would jump to attention, change quickly to 'At ease!'. He would move smartly when the section wheeled. 'Right wheel!' 'Left wheel!' 'About turn!' He could do it all right—if he wished to. He could also have an eager gleam in his eye.

One day I said to him, 'Quinny, how come you can drill well some days, and other days you just don't seem to be with it?'

He gave me one of his long and disconcerting stares, and then said, 'You said you liked parrots, didn't you?'

I told him I liked parrots all right, and he just stood there a bit amused, and having a grin to himself as though it were a private joke. Then he took my hand and shook it warmly. 'I'm glad you like parrots', he said happily. 'I'm real glad. I tell you that. I'm real glad.'

After that he wandered off.

I have a habit of scratching my head when I can't understand something. Often, when Quinn was in my sights, I would scratch my head. Quinny was a strange character, without doubt.

After all these years, I look back at Quinn and grin quite a lot, but my aim is not to give you a full biography of him. It is just that the guy really intrigued me. To tell the truth, I used to make quite a thing of analysing people, and had the notion that I was never wrong about anyone.

Well, I was wrong about Quinn; quite wrong in fact.

The Strange Case of Caraby Quinn

We had plenty to do on the Malayan Peninsula in the eleven months from our landing at Singapore till the Jap troops' coming through from Thailand to Alor Star. Alor Star was where they first met the British troops.

Before all that happened, we were up and down the Peninsula. I was mad on riding motorbikes. We had Harleys and Nortons, and would break in the army-green machines until we were fairly racing on those coiled bitumen strips of road. Also we bivouacked in the jungle. Once we went over a hundred miles down a river on rafts, and I picked up typhus from drinking the river water. That was painful.

Most things were fun then, but I never saw Quinny fun it up. Not that he was morose or cynical about things. He just seemed to like being withdrawn from us, into himself.

In action he was quite a character. He would have brilliant and lucid periods. We got to like him, especially his intuitions. He intuited very well. He intuited planes a long way off. He intuited that the Japs would come this way or that. Intuition would take up his whole being, and he would concentrate deeply on the dangers that threatened us. Not that we had a lot of contact with the Japs—some of us—until we got on to Singapore Island, fighting a retreating action which went by the euphemism of 'strategic withdrawal'.

We sometimes lost Caraby in those last days of fighting. 'I'm trapping!' he would shout, and he would go off through the rubber plantations. He wasn't supposed to do that. He was supposed to remain with the section, but he would go off and we

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wouldn't see him for hours. In those hours we would move quickly—backwards! But still Quinn would find us, and we knew something had happened. Quinn never told us about it. Somewhere in that strange brain of his, he kept stories that would be fascinating to hear. I tell you I would have given a lot to get at Quinn's stories, especially his intuiting and trapping stories. God knows what really happened in those weeks on the Island.

I was wounded in action and rehabilitated in the prison camp hospital. I won't tell you about that. Much of it was ghastly. Then one day I saw Quinn. I saw him with a bunch of others from the Mental Ward. He was walking along with that stiff and unbending way that mental patients seem to affect. Head bent forwards slightly, eyes looking at no one, hands hanging at the sides, partly tensed, partly loose—a queer combination of withdrawal and refusing to come to terms with things about them. The term 'zombie' is an unkind one, and I won't use it for Quinny, but that was what he made me think of.

I was limping away—with a splint on one leg and a walking stick in hand. When we drew near the bunch of men, I said, 'Hullo, Quinny!'

He didn't even look at me. He passed like a skinny human ghost. His eyes didn't turn to me, but I could see they were sunken back into his head like dark pools. I shivered a bit.

'They never talk', said the orderly who was seeing me around the place, teaching me to walk.

'It's funny', he added, 'you hardly ever see them. They rarely let them out of the ward for a walk'.

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He peered after the squad of men with sick minds. 'The whole place is barred up', he said. 'The Japs made sure of that. They're scared one of them might get out.'

We struggled on. I was panting a bit. The orderly said slowly, 'You know, the Japs almost reverence those guys. Maybe they think they have special spirits in them, and are sorts of gods. I'm not sure; but they avert their eyes from anyone who is crazy'.

I thought about that. I thought about Caraby Quinn and his intuiting. I lay awake that night, trying to work it all out, and in the end I gave up, and joined the fellows lining up at the rose-bowl—the urinal—whilst they got rid of their excess fluid from their beriberi. I supposed that they had to keep the rose-bowl inside the Mental Ward for the sake of the superstitious Nips.

The Mental Ward wasn't far away from where I slept. For the most part it was silent, but occasionally a day would come when most of the patients seemed disturbed. You would hear shoutings and cryings. Sometimes there were sobbings. One or two who had betrayed their mates under cruel beatings from the Japanese would wail out their guilt. Maybe they were a bit morbid, but it always made sense to me. I would listen to hear what Quinny might say, but only once did I ever hear his voice.

I used to listen because I wondered what happened when he went off on his own for hours during the fighting. The one time I heard Quinn shout made my blood run cold, for although I knew it was Quinn, I was sure I had never known that particular Quinn. Not the one who was shouting the words with unholy glee. It was all about trapping, and it evoked

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horrible visions of him trapping unwary Nips and doing them to death with a bayonet. In fact I have even hesitated to write this particular paragraph, because I think killing men—even the enemy—is a pretty horrible thing, and nothing is gained by recounting it.

That great day came when Lord Mountbatten came into our camp. He had his beautiful wife with him. He put her up on a mess table, and shouted 'Meet the Missus!'

Meet the Missus!—why, she was a doll, and we hadn't seen a woman in three-and-a-half years. We just adored her: we worshipped nervously from afar.

Mountbatten looked pretty good in his commando gear. We admired it, but wanted none of it. Most of us were broken people. Some were too scared to go out through the gates to walk about in the new freedom. They slunk back from those opened gates, almost crying.

The curious thing about many from the Mental Ward was that they suddenly came to life, as though nothing had happened in three-and-a-half years. Somehow they had wangled it so that they remained oblivious of the events of those years. Now something got to their minds, and they emerged quite cheerfully. They were thin, but happy. Even Quinn was happy. I saw the twisted grin on his face, and he recognised me and said, 'Hullo there, Goddie! It's great being free, isn't it?'. I was a bit stunned by it all.

He went home on the same hospital ship as those of us who had been given sickness priority. It was a beautiful ship, all gleaming white, and it could do

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twenty knots. Quite fast. In no time we were in Sydney as the first returning POWs from the Far East. The crowd went mad, ticker taping, screaming, bands playing, shouting, crying, singing, and altogether welcoming us. Quinny was in the same ambulance as I was, and he didn't mind the girls jumping up and hugging and kissing him.

A few days earlier, while we were still on board ship, I had found myself sprawled next to Quinny in the sunshine on deck. Unexpectedly, he had spoken. 'It's really something to be here, eh!' he had said, and I had marvelled at his unusual lucidity.

'You OK now?' I had asked.

He had winked at me. 'I've been OK all the time.'

I had looked at him like a stunned duck. 'You're kidding; you haven't been OK at all.'

He had grinned. 'Most of the time I was OK. Occasionally I had bad memories. They weren't so good.'

He had seemed satisfied, however, and had gone on grinning. 'It was a good place to hide out.'

I had sat on deck a long time after he went below. I was trying to figure out Caraby Quinn. I kept telling myself that it was I who had been the nut case—not Quinn hiding away from the stress of the camp, being looked after in a special way, free from the Japanese, and having his own thoughts. Three-and-a-half years of incarceration had virtually passed him by. I kept thinking that the man was quite cunning.

Before we reached Sydney, Quinn had gone back into his own mind, withdrawing, closing the curtains to hide himself. He didn't grin or wink again. He seemed to be preparing for his home situation. Only when the girls clambered into our ambulance did he temporarily revive. He took that event quite well,

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indeed very nicely. When we reached the Repatriation Hospital at Concord he was back in his cocoon. I had a suspicion that he liked his cocoon, and in fact found it very cosy.

It was years later that I met Quinn again. He was living down at Millers Point in one of the Harbour Trust homes. He was on his own, and completely withdrawn. I knocked on his door in the line of business I was doing, and he scarcely looked at me.

'I don't see people', he said. He was quite apathetic.

'May I see the missus?' I asked him.

He shook his head. 'There's no missus', he said, 'and there never has been'.

It must have been some characteristic gesture of his that made me recognise him. 'Caraby Quinn!' I said.

He looked at me with disinterest. 'That's the name', he agreed. He looked stolidly at me. 'Someone tell you I live here?' he asked.

'Nobody told me', I said. 'I just recognised you. You were in our unit. You were in Changi.'

He stared at me, his mind still away back of him. Then he peered. He suddenly became startled. 'Goddie!' he said, 'Goddie the sergeant!'

A faint grin came onto his face. 'Fancy Goddie coming here, to this place.'

I gathered he didn't think much of Millers Point.

We sat and talked. He let me make the cup of tea, as though he expected others would be a help to him. He also told me about his TPI Pension for war neurosis. I thought, 'War neurosis, my eye!'. I remembered our talk on the beautiful hospital ship.

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'Quinny', I said, 'would I be right in saying you don't have a war neurosis?'

He was temporarily startled. 'No neurosis?' he asked. He seemed to be thinking about that. Finally he made a decision. 'No. Maybe it isn't neurosis, but I'm pretty sure I've got some sort of thing. Maybe a bug.'

'What do you mean—"a bug"?' I asked.

He smiled faintly. 'Over there in Malaya there were all sorts of things going. Some people call them "demons".'

I felt my blood freeze a bit, and something crawled up the skin over my spine. 'Demons?' I asked suddenly. I coughed over the cup of tea.

'Some used to call them "bities"', he said. 'You know, they come and bite you, and you are never the same.'

He didn't seem to have much time for psychiatrists or therapists. 'They don't really understand', he said. 'They don't know our world at all.'

I felt a bit uncomfortable. After that burst of conversation, Quinny retired into himself. I washed up the cups, and let myself out. Quinn didn't even nod.

Curiosity took me back there. Indeed I often used to visit Quinn, seeing he was in my area. Also I had that chronic 'old soldier' syndrome which makes you ferret out your old friends and acquaintances to see them and talk. Maybe some of us oldies are still looking for answers to the problems raised in those years: I'm not sure.

Sometimes I could draw Quinn out and at other times nothing happened. I continued making the cups of tea. On a few occasions I took pies and pasties and had lunch with him. I wondered whether he

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ever cooked for himself. He seemed quite healthy, even if a bit morbid.

What I am about to tell next really sounds as though from the realm of the impossible and the absurd. In fact you will tell me I dreamed it up. No way! The crazy thing happened, and it all began with Charlie our galah.

What is a galah? It is the most prolific of all Australian parrots. Also it is very beautiful. If it were not so common it would be looked upon as having rare beauty. It is made of gentle pinks, greys and white, all rather pastel in tone.

Parrots, of course, are humans of small size, in feathers. They thoroughly understand the human mind, although they have a certain contempt for it. Their own mind is much more astute. They think more quickly. Also, they never let you know what they are thinking. Or they do, with some sort of contempt!

Our Charlie had brought up our children. He demanded their attention continually, and got it. They rather paid court to him. If they laughed and joked or patronised him, he would fix them with a steely stare. You might even call it a glare. It brought them back into line quite quickly. Occasionally he would take a quick nip at them, possibly to keep them in order. One parrot specialist told me that the nip is a sign of affection: in which case our Charlie must be quite a loving parrot.

When I asked Quinny to come up to our rather posh North Shore suburb, I never imagined a miracle would take place. Certainly not through a mere galah, but then is any galah ever 'mere'?

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Caraby Quinn had no means of transport. As I could not imagine him getting a bus or a taxi or even a train, I picked him up one Saturday morning. Our children who remained unmarried were divided in their activities between football, hockey and tennis. They scarcely gave the time of day to the withdrawn old soldier. He looked at them and blinked, after which they were gone. My wife was very kind to Caraby, and he responded a bit to her.

Then I took Caraby out to the back, where I had hundreds of budgerigars, finches and doves. I had only one parrot, Charlie the galah.

Quinny looked at the budgies with deep interest. His interest was less for the finches and doves.

Then Charlie spoke from behind him. 'Ow are yuh?' he asked in a chortling kind of voice.

Quinny's eyes shadowed as they often did when people asked him that. He turned and saw Charlie. His hand flew up to his head as though he had been shot between the eyes. 'Oh, my God!' he said.

Charlie surveyed him with thoughtful eyes. 'Ullo! 'Ullo! 'Ullo!' It was as though an old friend had walked in.

At that point I didn't know how much of a friend. I didn't really understand.

I won't say Quinny tottered away from the bird, and back into the house. But it was as though he had seen a ghost, and it had drained him of feeling. He sat down on a couch, and my wife brought him some orange juice. Caraby Quinn drank it in a gulp and then asked for coffee. I hadn't heard him ask for anything before that morning.

After a time he said, 'You like parrots?'. I had a strange feeling because it brought back memories of

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our early army days. I remembered that Quinny had asked me that question then, and more than once. It had seemed so stupid because irrelevant.

'I guess I do', I said.

He muttered something to himself and sat staring at the empty orange juice glass. Finally he gathered himself. 'I never thought it could do that', he said. When I looked puzzled, he said, 'That parrot: that galah. It unnerved me'.

He saw my bewilderment. 'I suppose I locked myself away, not wanting to see things like that.'

'You mean things like Charlie the galah?' I said.

'Yes', he said, 'like Charlie the galah'. He sat silent for a moment, and then said, 'I used to have a lot to do with galahs'.

When I drove him back to Millers Point he seemed different. When we went inside his Harbour Trust terrace house he seemed lonely. He looked around at the kitchen-dining room as though he were seeing it for the first time. When I left him he seemed abject and even forlorn. That was when the idea first made its way into my brain. It was a strange idea, but maybe we needed strange ideas for fellows like Caraby Quinn.

I rang Dennis Carmody, the parrot breeder. He lives just out of Bowral and has 120 aviaries. I think he has every variety of Australian parrot. He won't keep exotics—imported parrots. He admires them, but will not keep them. Dennis had given Charlie the galah to us, as little more than a fledgling. He had instructed us in how to train the galah, and we had carried out his orders faithfully. We had trained Charlie on Dennis's system.

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I talked to Dennis over the phone—STD—for quite some time. I yarned to him about Caraby Quinn. Dennis was ex-army, fighting in the Middle East and Pacific Islands areas. He also had a few decorations. After the war he had done a bit of general farming, but gradually his heart turned to birds—parrots mainly. His hobby became his life and livelihood. Gradually he had amassed his vast collection of birds. He thought he could understand something of Quinny, but wasn't all that confident about my plan.

'It might go the wrong way, Goddie', he said. 'It might drive him back beyond where he's been.' I remembered Quinny's wink and grin on a special occasion, and wondered whether anything could drive him that way.

When I asked Caraby whether he would like a drive in the country, he responded with unusual alacrity.

'I reckon that would be good', he said, and again he was looking around his Harbour Trust terrace house as though it were strange and unknown to him; as though, almost, it were a prison.

We had a good crisp day. It was early autumn. We sped towards the Southern Highlands. Quinny was developing a new habit, hitting his right fist into his left hand and breathing hard and exclaiming. He would say, 'What do you know? What do you know?' and give a chuckle. I thought he was on a high, and wondered whether he would relapse into a reactionary depression.

He didn't. He really enjoyed the day. It was obvious that he rarely visited a restaurant or roadhouse. He loved the coffee and cakes that we had.

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When we turned off the main highway into a secondary road, he looked about him with relish. He peered at every cow, horse and sheep he could find. We left the sealed secondary road and were soon on a red, ochrous farm track. After a time we went across a cattle grid and were on Dennis Carmody's farm. There were a few overfed beef Herefords, ruminating in knee-length imported grasses. Quinny viewed these, too, with delight.

Then we turned around the drive and there were the endless lines of aviaries, and the massed choir of chortles, whistles, calls and screams dinned up against our ears.

At first Caraby was stunned. He went white in the face. This changed to red. In a second he was out of the vehicle and running towards the cages. I started up the car again, following him. Dennis came out of an aviary, carefully closing the door behind him. He stared at Quinny and then nodded to me. Quinn ignored us both. He was running up and down the rows of cages. Dennis looked quite concerned. What he had thought might happen seemed now to be so.

'I think we have tipped the scales', he said, shaking my hand and being a bit mournful. 'I think he might have tipped over into something.'

'Look at him!' I said.

Dennis looked and nodded. Then he began to grin. 'He loves parrots', he breathed. 'He really loves them.' If anyone should have known that, then it was Dennis.

Quinny's face was pink with excitement and his eyes were shining. 'Gang-gangs!' he was shouting, 'Eclectus and Major Mitchells!'. He reeled off name

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after name, as he rushed from aviary to aviary. We followed him about. He certainly looked manic. By the time he finished his rushing about, he was quite exhausted.

Even then he scarcely saw Dennis. Not even when I introduced him. 'Fancy all those parrots in one place', he was muttering. Then he became aware of Dennis. 'How did you do it?' he asked.

Dennis nodded thoughtfully. 'There are ways and means, you know.' He left it at that and invited us to have some lunch. Dennis's wife Beryl was a sensible woman, and competent. She helped her husband in the bird breeding, and she had cooked a superb meal. Quinny enjoyed it immensely.

When we were relaxing on the glassed-in verandah, drinking coffee, Caraby suddenly exclaimed, 'Corellas! I didn't see any corellas!'

Dennis nodded. 'That's right. I don't have any.'

Quinn looked stunned. 'But you must have corellas', he said. He was staring at Dennis. 'Don't tell me', he was saying in an ominous voice, 'that you don't like corellas'.

'They're so noisy', the parrot man said. 'They never give up on noise. They're a bit like galahs.'

'Now what's wrong with galahs?' Quinny asked him. He had begun to bristle. I left them on the pretext of getting more coffee. I went into the kitchen to talk to Beryl. We could hear the two men going at it—hammer and tongs. I had never seen Quinn so animated.

'Hope he doesn't lapse back into heavy depression', I said.

Beryl shook her head. 'He's coming to life', she commented. 'This could be the making of him.'

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We chatted about parrots and the uncanny ways they had, the influence they exercised on human beings. We agreed they were creatures all on their own. Nothing else was quite like them.

On the way home, Quinn was quiet, but not depressed. He was thinking deeply. Once he said to me, 'You like parrots, don't you?'. I nodded. This time it didn't sound weird. Somewhere in me, confidence was growing that Quinny could emerge from his decades of nothingness, his blank anonymity. Now this I confess to you: I know I am a sucker when it comes to human beings. I give anything to see just one of them rehabilitated. I have to admit that human beings are quite special—almost as special as parrots!

Later, I went to Millers Point to see Quinn, but he was gone. He had given his house back to the Harbour Trust. No one knew where he was. I was a bit sad about that. I rang the Repatriation Hospital. No, they hadn't heard anything of Quinn. The Repatriation Department didn't have his address. They just kept paying his pension into his bank account, and that address was the same. I rang Dennis Carmody, but he had heard nothing.

One day Carmody rang me. 'I have a letter from Quinn', he said. 'He wants me to go south, into Victoria. He wants me to sign a contract for corellas and galahs. He says he can get me any number of them.'

We talked about that, wondering whether Quinny had gone queer: I mean queerer. I felt I owed something to Caraby; after all I had steered him in the direction of parrots.

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'Are you going?' I asked. Dennis hesitated, and then said he thought he would. 'Do me good to have a holiday. I'll get a lad in from the next farm. He knows how to look after the birds, and Beryl can direct him.'

When he said that, I knew I had to go, too. I knew then that I also needed a holiday.

A few days later we were on our way to the Mallee.

The story could take a long time to tell—given in all the details. We found Caraby Quinn looking after himself in a large tent. We had brought my caravan, and so the three of us made camp together. Quinny had a large truck with thumping great cages on its tray. He had large nets, and parrot decoys. In short, he had all the equipment of a birdcatcher. Also he had a trapper's licence—a rare thing to obtain. I guess he pulled his returned soldier status: I don't know. For his part, Quinny was all ready to talk, and talk he did.

He told us his story. Before joining the army, he had trapped parrots. The farmers in the Mallee loved him. Parrots weren't in such large flocks in those days, but they were a menace to the grain crops. In the Depression years birds were hard to sell. So the cocky-farmers paid Quinn to destroy as many birds as possible. Quinn hated doing this, but it was a living. When the war came, he was glad to get away from the bird-killing, so he enlisted. I remembered him asking me, time and again, whether I liked parrots. It had seemed a bit queer then, but Quinn had not been queer at all; only a bit sensitive.

Quinn went on to talk about the 'greenies', the conservation buffs. 'They don't understand', he said.

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'The farmers are losing millions of dollars a year from the corellas and the galahs and sulphur-crested cockatoos. The Government is now willing to play ball. I have permission to kill as many as I like. These parrots are not on the Protected Species list.'

We nodded at that. 'So that's what you're doing', I said.

He shook his head. 'No!' he said violently, 'I can't. I just can't come at it. That's why I had to give it up before'.

We were bewildered, and we gestured towards the large cages on his truck. 'What's all this gear for, then?' we asked.

Quinny's eyes shone. There was nothing queer about him; he looked as healthy as any man I had ever seen.

'That's why I asked Dennis down here.' He leaned forward, grinning hugely as though he had a king-sized secret. 'I want us to go into business, me and Dennis.' He paused and looked at me. 'You can be in it, too', he said. 'That's if you want to.'

He spread the plan before us. Since Dennis knew just about all the parrot breeders and bird wheeler-dealers, then he could arrange the sales for all the wild parrots which Quinny could trap. I looked at Dennis. The scheme didn't seem too wildcat to him. He nodded, but I saw he had reservations. I left them both to talk it out, and wandered off into the mallee scrub. Don't start me off on the matter of mallee scrub. I love it so much I could bore you with talking about it.

That afternoon—close to evening—the corellas came. Quinny explained that there were two flocks. One

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was of the little corellas. The other was of the long-billed corellas. We ached with laughter at the antics of both. We just marvelled at the scrambled white and crimson all over the pastures as the birds picked away at the fallen grass seed. The sight of them in the wheat was a bit heart-rending, but we roared at their antics. Quinny was as proud as Punch at what they did—as though, in a way, he had invented them. That he loved them was pretty clear to us.

Quinny boiled billy tea. He also pulled a damper out of the ashes of his fire. We ate that with some tinned meat, and apples from a crate. We were like kids.

Quinny settled down to business. First of all he talked to me, gesturing towards Carmody. 'I can tell Dennis isn't one hundred percent convinced', he said. 'He thinks people won't buy wild parrots.' He waved a fork in the air. 'Let me tell you both, that corellas and galahs are the most intelligent parrots in the world. God made them so they could get to know humans, and even help them.'

Dennis didn't seem to think this revelation absurd. Thinking about our Charlie, I could see some sense.

'If every family had a galah or a corella', said Quinny, 'then we'd have less family trouble. It's parrots that train humans, you know'.

This was a new Quinn. I sat back, enjoying the billy tea, the conversation and, most of all, Quinn. We talked for hours, brushing off the mosquitoes from the Murray River. When we went to bed, I lay awake for some time. Two things puzzled me: the first being Quinn's utter abhorrence of killing the parrots; and the second, his incredible confidence—almost pathological, I thought—that people would buy his wild birds.

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The next day we went on a trapping expedition. It was quite something. Quinny laid out his springloaded nets, scattered wheat grain plentifully and placed his decoys skilfully. He had recorded cries on his cassette recorder. He bundled us into the scrub, set the recorder going, and we waited. He kept the cord release in his right hand.

Then he began to tell us about his dislike of killing. 'I was born a trapper', he said. 'I learned it from my old man. We used to go out as kids, and at first I loved every minute of it. The trouble was, I had a long-billed corella. We called it "Billy" of course, and that was short for "Billy Hughes". You remember, Bill Hughes was Prime Minister, and a very clever man. Also he looked like a cocky!

'I loved that long-billed corella. As I said, no parrot in the world is as intelligent and affectionate. He loved me, too, and would get mad if anyone tried to take my affection. We talked together for hours. That's when I learned to understand parrots and how they think. Once that happened, I didn't like the work any more. Every day I'd go through this pain when the old man and I killed the birds by their hundreds.'

A white flock wheeled overhead and then turned south. Quinny didn't seem greatly disturbed.

'When the war came I got out of the business, but in Malaya I got back into it.'

I felt my blood run cold. Quinn wasn't smiling any more. In fact he looked sad, and stern. He put his head down, staring at the ground. 'I used to trap them, you know. I'd always learned how to move quietly, and so I trapped them.'

I heard him sigh, and there was a lot of sadness in it. 'I didn't like killing those Japs any more than I

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liked killing the birds. I felt the same kind of sickness. I used to ask myself why men killed birds and one another.'

We sat whilst the flock from the south wheeled back. I was glad I had come to the Mallee, but I shivered along with Quinn. He was uncovering the silence of old soldiers: the sorrow of the human race. Suddenly he raised his hand. 'They're coming', he said. 'Watch them. They're coming down!'

So they were. Quinn's eyes were shining, alive with excitement; his face was pink and glowing. I envied him for the joy that he knew.

There were the flutterings, the cries of the sentinels who settled in the short mallee eucalypts and watched out for the safety of the flock. Then the birds alighted near the decoys and began greedily going for the grain. They formed a bubbling mass below the nets.

There was humour in the whole matter, for the corellas were the short-billed ones. I tried not to laugh at their antics, their wise nodding, their proud swaggering gait—indeed everything about them that corresponded to our own human ways.

Quinny pulled the cord, and the net flew down. Hundreds of untrapped birds fluttered up. The sentinels cried, the flock formed, wheeled and fled. We could hear their cries as they shot upwards and away.

On the ground the birds cried indignantly, squawked and shrieked. They fluttered madly in the nets, protesting against the indignity of it all.

Quinny said, 'I'm going to show you something'. He went to the truck and came back with an instrument that could only be called 'a stamper'. I could imagine it being used to stamp earth. It had a long

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sturdy handle, and the base was of iron. Quinn said, 'I'll only do one, so watch!'

We watched. Caraby Quinn walked towards the flustered, fluttering, squawking and screaming birds. He raised his instrument and brought it down upon a bird, crushing it. One quiver and it was dead.

Quinn looked at us. 'I used to kill hundreds', he said. He looked down at the bird. 'Hundreds!' he repeated. After a moment he rushed towards the truck, put on some elbow-length leather gloves, grabbed a couple of small cages and began to catch the birds under the net. When he filled these small carry-boxes, he emptied their contents into the large cages.

'Grab some gloves and carry-boxes', he said. 'Come and help!'

We slipped on the gloves and joined in the turmoil. Birds were flapping everywhere. Some of them were indignant, shrieking their outrage to the heavens. The skies themselves were empty of corellas. The cages quickly filled. Finally we had them all captured.

We stood there, three middle-aged men, looking at the dynamic mass of feathers and protest. The parrots were still protesting that their dignity had been assailed. Some, however, had settled down and withdrawn into themselves. Corellas have a way of creating their own dignity.

Suddenly Quinny said, 'Fancy that! There's a long-billed corella amongst them'. He jumped on to the truck. He opened one of the large cages and walked into it, careful to cover the partly opened door. In a flash he had the bird. It clung to his gloves, claws sticking firmly, and long beak biting into the tough leather.

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Caraby was unperturbed. One hand held the bird, the other smoothed down its wings. Quinny gave a youthful chuckle.

'Now Dennis, my fine friend', he said, 'I can put your fears at rest'. He tucked the bird under one arm and fumbled in his back pocket for a pair of scissors. They were long-bladed and sharp. He clipped away at a wing of the corella. It protested but he was firm. The clipped feathers fluttered to the ground.

Caraby turned to me. 'Dennis can't see thousands of these birds being sold because they are wild. They won't make pets. People won't get to know them.' His eyes gleamed. 'He's wrong!' he shouted. 'I'll show you!'

He began to walk away from us into the scrub. 'See you in twenty minutes', he said. We lost sight of him as he walked towards the river. We stood in silence, wondering what it was all about.

After a time Dennis said, 'I have never seen a man so renewed as Quinn is'.

I nodded. 'It's a miracle.'

'I understand the miracle', Dennis said. 'I remember years ago thinking how noisy, screechy and harsh were parrot cries. Now they are like music in my ears. I love them. I feel as helpless as a kitten when I hear them. If I hear one in the bush, I want to run to where the bird is.'

I said gently, 'So seeing our Charlie awakened all that memory in Quinny, eh?'

He nodded. 'It did. And seeing my parrots destroyed his wrong memories.'

'Even of trapping and killing Japs?'

'I guess so', Dennis said, 'but I really don't know'. He stood staring down at the dead bird under the net. 'I'm not really sure, but I guess so.'

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After a time Quinny came out of the scrub. On his left arm was the long-billed corella. Quinny was talking to it, and his voice was very cool. It was gentle and intimate. It was soothing. He kept muttering to the bird.

He grinned at us. 'It's tame', he said. 'After a few days it will look forward to my coming. It'll like me better than the food I will give it. It won't be long before it will talk, whistle, cough, bark and laugh.'

We watched him, fascinated at the rapport between the man and the bird. Once or twice the bird nodded, as though it was agreeing with him. Occasionally Quinny would touch its back feathers, gently, smoothing them down.

'Every family will want one', he said. 'They won't be getting a wild one.' His voice was steady, but not boastful. 'Twenty minutes a bird, I reckon. Give me twenty minutes with any bird and I will tame it.'

Dennis seemed impressed. 'You'll need to teach others the method', he said, 'especially if you aim to sell thousands'.

Quinn recoiled from that. There was protest in his eyes at first, but that died. He was thinking the matter through. Then he said, 'I guess I could. I guess I could teach it to some people. Maybe that's a good idea'. He paused, thinking again. After a time he nodded strongly. 'I guess we'll do that, Dennis. It's much better than killing them.'

We stood watching him in the pure autumn air of the Victorian Mallee. Somewhere behind us, the River Murray was making its way towards South Australia.

For his part, Quinny stood there, the quiet bird on his arm, its solemn eyes staring ahead. Quinny was

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looking down at it with gentle, but strong, love. Behind us, in the cages, were white parrots with orange-scarlet on the head, mantle and upper breast. They were jostling for perch positions.

The one long-billed corella was doing no jostling. He was sitting on Quinny's arm, as though deeply contented, and Quinny was standing there, not moving, immobile as a statue, but his eyes were different from the old days. In fact, Quinny himself was a different man, standing there, immobile as he was, in the autumnal Mallee sun.

Laughing Gunner

THEY began calling him 'Tiger' after a while. Not that there was any reason for it. Alan started it: 'He's a tiger', said Alan; 'a tiger with the thing'.

He was, too, but the word 'tiger' in that context is slang. Not that we didn't use slang—we did. Even the kid called Tiger used it, but it was not often he spoke.

He was queer that way. In the Army you find it hard enough to stop some chaps talking. They want to go on and on, and it means putting a drink into them, or, if they're sick, a thermometer. No, they won't stop, and it's no use giving them a drink either, when you think it over, because they only talk a lot more. Young Tiger didn't talk very much.

To look at him you'd think he'd do a lot of talking. He was a good-looking kid in his own way, and one you'd think the girls would fall for, but you'd be wrong. They shied away from him, as though maybe there was something funny about him. When you thought about it, too, there was something funny about him. He didn't like people, and they didn't cotton to him; not quickly anyway.

I liked him, but maybe I like most people; I don't know. I liked Tiger because there was something

about him I admired. Men don't like a fellow who keeps to himself, but Tiger was so young that they thought he shouldn't be in the Army, and so they excused any faults he had. It wasn't as though Tiger worried very much about their thoughts about him. He was just self-sufficient, I suppose.

Sometimes I would catch him looking at someone, and there would be a strange gleam in his eyes. I didn't rightly know what it meant. Even now I don't know what it meant, but then it's hard to know these things.

'I think we should pal up with him a bit', Jon said; but after a while they all left him alone. They stopped saying things to him, too.

At first they used to gig him on his parade-ground work. He just couldn't march. Put him with a column of men and you would see his legs moving against the easy swing of the platoon. Everyone in step except Tiger, and he walked along, sublimely ignorant of the error of his step. Men hated marching behind him, because they trod on his heels; or in front of him, because he trod on theirs. To see him with a rifle would make you groan. Clumsy and awkward it was in his hands, and it sent a shiver through you to see him slope arms or order arms or present arms. Officers and non-commissioned officers tore their hair trying to show him how to do it, but to no avail. He just plugged along—go your way, I'll go my way—and what could you do about it? Everyone gave up trying.

They would keep him off the big parades—you know, where you present arms to a big shot with brass around his hat. Yes, they were careful to keep him off those, and I have seen sergeant majors nearly

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go mad when at the last moment he would wander onto the parade ground, a vacant look on his face, and his rifle trailing behind him, and maybe a puttee trailing, too, and his buttons all undone.

In his eyes there would be an empty look, and his face would be devoid of expression. He comprehended none of our urgent gestures. The sergeant major would look at him with agonised expression, and in a painful whisper would mutter, 'Get him off quickly, quickly. I'll go mad if he doesn't. I'll kill him, that's what I'll do. I'll kill him!'. Someone would race over to Tiger and lead him away. It seemed a pity, but there it was.

You'd say he was no good for anything, and at that time you wouldn't have been wrong. It was only when we started on machine-gun work that the change came.

You should have seen that boy on the machine-guns. It was uncanny the way he picked up knowledge about them. Any kind of machine-gun or sub-machine-gun. He liked the Vickers the best.

When the lectures started, he was there first. He never turned up late for M.G. classes. He was first with the answers, too. Knew everything there was to know about rates of fire and lines and fields of fire, and how many parts there were to a Lewis, and he could disassemble and reassemble with his eyes closed, and beat even the experts. Yes, he was a 'tiger' with them, as Alan said.

If the lecturer asked about enfilading fire and effective ranges, and questions like that, then the class could sit back and listen to Tiger. He knew. He seemed to be in his element. The rest of us he did not see.

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We did not count. It was the machine-gun he liked. His hand would creep over it in a caressing way.

'That kid ain't natural', Alan whispered to me.

I muttered something about no soldier being natural, but he was right. There was something strange about this young fellow. I learned to become proficient enough with machine-guns, but even now they don't thrill me; most of us were like that.

When we went on board the transport that took us to Malaya, the platoon sergeants were busy giving the men their bayonet drill, and you could see and hear them trying to work up the troops.

'Point!' they would yell in a loud voice. 'Withdraw!' they would scream, and then in a fury, 'Point! Withdraw! Point! Withdraw!', and the men would be nearly mad with imagination, and the bayonets would be flashing. And yet Tiger did not like the bayonet any more than he liked the rifle. It was queer, when you came to think of it. In the end they left him with his machine-guns, and if you went up on to the top deck you would see him there day and night, staring over the sight. At night, when the moon came out, you could see him, white and pale, as he searched for aircraft.

The sergeant who wanted him to point and withdraw was disgusted at Tiger's unseeing indifference. 'Hell!' he would say. 'Call that a soldier!'

'You should see him on the Vickers', said Jon, and after that the sergeant left him alone. They forgot all about him when we drew into Singapore.

Later, when the war broke out, they remembered him. They put him on a Vickers right down on the Mersing Beach. The chaps in that show remember

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how open the beach was to attack, and how Tiger fired, laughing, at a Jap aeroplane that came swooping towards the yellow sand. The aeroplane dived angrily at him, but he only laughed, and kept firing. When the bomb landed near him, he went further along the beach and still kept firing.

After that show, we went to Singapore Island. Things were grim there, much different from the east coast, and all day long the great ack-acks thumped away at the sky. We were short of planes there. The Japs had plenty, and they bombed our positions on the north-west sector of the island, and across the Straits of Johore boomed about 500 Jap field guns, and they landed one quarter of a million shells in our sector in just about twenty-four hours. Still we crouched in our weapon pits and M.G. nests, and we waited. We knew they would come, and in the end they did come.

They came on Sunday night. The yellow men tumbled from their armoured barges into the water. The water was dark with their dead. Our guns hammered loudly, in a kind of mad song. Sometimes we'd hear one stutter, somewhere out in front of us, and go quiet.

Jon and Alan and I crouched over ours. We had Tommy guns over our shoulders so that we could be ready if the guns jammed. Tiger was close to the water, and we could hear his gun, and then the others came through, those who had run their guns hot or jammed them. Nodding as they passed us, they left us bent over our guns. There was no glory in their eyes, and they seemed weary to death. Tiger

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had come back with them, and now he and his gun were in an empty pit near ours. Then the enemy came through.

They had their old stunts of throwing crackers, and screaming, but we were ready for that. Tiger's gun crackled first, and it became the joyful thrumming of a song of death. The Vickers raked the long *lalang* and the barbs that twirled and twisted through the short, rough scrub. This meant the hillocks were kept clear of the enemy. They jammed up against the wire. They writhed in the now grey grass.

We were tired with weaving bandoliers into the guns, and snapping new magazines into the Bren. The guns became hot. Someone had a Tommy gun going, and it was doing good work even at its range. Then our gun jammed, and in the heat of it all we could do nothing.

'We'll have to get out of it', yelled Jon, and he grabbed his rifle. He picked up a lump of iron and smashed into the gun to disable it. After that, we went quickly because there was a hail of fire near us. Alan, who had the Bren, fell and I grabbed him. Jon cursed in a terrible voice, but it was no good. Alan was done for.

Only after we got away a bit did we hear the other gun still singing, and Jon said, 'Good God! That's Tiger and his gun!'

I said, 'Maybe it's just Tiger. I don't know about the crew.' And we were silent.

'He's a fool!' Jon said, and we both knew that, but didn't like to think about it at all.

We heard the gun for some time, and then things got hot again, and we lost the sound of it. Jon and I

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spent the night on the aerodrome. We had a tin of bully beef between us.

Next morning we saw Tiger. He just stared at us.

'Our gun jammed', we told him.

He just nodded. 'I knew that', he said; nothing more.

Jack, who had been with him, told us the other men had been killed and Tiger had told him to go if he wanted to. They had plenty of ammunition, and Tiger was prepared to stay. Mad but brave. The enemy had swung about on their flank, and although things were pretty thick they had managed to get away.

'Nearly too late', Jack had said; and then, softly to us, 'He's mad!'

On the Wednesday night the enemy came through and cut off our company. We did not know, until suddenly we heard their crackers and cries and realised they were on our right flank.

We wondered if they would swing across our front and then push us round. They didn't, but then we heard them on our left flank, and we knew that was the end. Jon and I looked at each other and we were pretty sick, and then, after a moment or so, one of the reinforcements we had on our gun just turned over and groaned. He was dead.

The other chap said, 'They'll get us'.

'So what!' said Jon savagely. 'What if they do?'

The reinforcement said nothing, but looked unhappy. Then Tiger's gun began to hammer, and we knew they were there. We set ours going, too, so that the two guns were singing a twin song, a rising and falling song which had the tone of madness through it, a sort of divine ecstasy, a fearful joy. I heard it most

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in the song of Tiger's gun, and I shivered, knowing I would never forget it.

The rounds were heating the gun, and I was praying the heat wouldn't seize it. It didn't. If it had we would have had to leave Tiger and his gun alone, and we knew what that meant. It was all or nothing here, and no soldier wants to die. He wants to fight, maybe, but not to die.

Tiger had two men on the gun with him, but only one was in our view. A moment later and he was over to us, reporting progress. We saw him crawling through the grass, and then his sharp, excited tones told us all. The other chap was killed and Tiger wanted more ammo; it was madness for us both to stay there. It needed only one gun on this short front; maybe we could get through. Tiger wanted to stay, and our ammo would do him; we'd better move pretty quick.

Jon took the gun, and I looked across to where Tiger was. There was a red glow from some fire or other, maybe a burning dump, and I could see his face. It was set with an intense joy such as I have never seen on any man's face. He was staring ahead, with the pale red light flickering up into the set hollows of his cheeks. The gun in his hands was singing the joy of the man.

Involuntarily I shuddered at this terrible magnificence. No awkwardness now; no blundering onto parades and being taken off. His life had reached some wild climax. He was a god, laughing, seized with the divine madness of death.

I gave ammo to the gunner, and he went across with it to the pit. I saw him crawl through the grass, and then I turned to Jon.

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'He'll stay there', I said. 'He'll stay there till crack of doom. We'd better get out!'

'Maybe that's being a coward', said Jon, and it was hard to read his voice.

'Maybe', I said, 'but he'll stay there even if we don't, and he wants us to go. There's only ammo for one gun now'.

'I see', said Jon, and his hand was still on the trigger.

For a moment, which might have been years, I looked across at the man who had been a misfit. Then he had seemed but a boy, but now he was full with his years and the glory was through his face. With each rise and fall of the mad song of his gun, his joy pulsed through him.

'Look', I said to Jon, and he let the gun go, looking at him.

'God!' he said sharply, and then the other gunner was across to us again.

'He said to go', he whispered excitedly. 'He's mad. So are we, if we stay.'

'We'll go', said Jon quickly, and with pain in his voice.

'Get the gun quickly', he said, and we made ready to go.

Somehow I got the ammo and ran across to where Tiger was. The air was thick with bullets, and I laughed at that, because the madness of the boy reached out to where I was and drew me with it. Jon and the other two I could see moving through the trees. I threw the ammo into the weapon pit, and he said 'Good!' in an exultant voice, and without turning his head.

'Luck!' I said to him, and knew that was a mad thing to say, and not effectual. He took no notice, and when I went through the trees, I could see

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the madness laughing from his face, and leaping from the gun.

Looking back, I saw the smile on his face, and then I had to run because thousands of the enemy were coming, and the night was filled with shots and cries.

Geoffrey C. Bingham:
A Short Biography, 1919–1994

Geoffrey Bingham was born Goulburn, NSW, 6th. January 1919, moving to Wahroonga, Sydney, at the age of five, attending Warrawee Primary School, and, because of love of farming trained At Hurlstone Agricultural High School, Glenfield NSW after which he shared with his family in farming the famous Box Hill Homestead near Riverstone until entering Moore Theological College in 1939.

In June 1940 he enlisted for Army Service with the Australian Imperial Forces, serving until March 1946. He became a physical training instructor, and as a Sergeant, was head of cable-laying team in 8th. Division Signals. He was in Malaya from 1941–45. He was decorated with the Military Medal and a Mention in Despatches for bravery in the field. Badly wounded, he was a Prisoner of War from February 1942 to August 1945 in Changi and Kranji Prisoner of War Camps. When partially recovered from his heavy wounding he was appointed Librarian in the hospital.

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He returned to Sydney October 1945 and on being discharged in March 1946 went on to be married to Laurel Chapman of Turramurra. They have a family of six children and, at this stage, eleven grandchildren. It is not surprising that many of his stories have a lot of appeal to children. As yet Geoffrey Bingham has not retired his passion for teaching and writing not permitting him to do so..

Geoffrey's writing career began when he was thirteen, his first short story being published in 1941. After the war he had a meteoric rise in literary fortunes, *The Bulletin* published 34 of his stories with a few years, the highest rate of acceptances by that journal. He had some years writing and farming on the North Coast of New South Wales a number of journals accepting his stories throughout Australasia. *Coast to Coast* published some of his tales and much later he was included in *Best Australian and New Zealand Short Stories* an anthology published by *The Reader's Digest*, and yet later an anthology published in East Germany in German.

After these early years of writing and farming he returned to Moore Theological College. He became Rector of the famous Garrison Church at Millers Point for four years, after which he served for 10 years in Pakistan. From 1967 to 1973 he was Principal of the Bible College of South Australia, and then became Executive Director New Creation Teaching Ministry, a Resource Centre with two Presses—New Creation Publications and Troubadour Press. It was in this work he began writing afresh and prolifically. His first book of short stories, *To Command the Cats* was published by Angus and Robertson, and this has been followed by a spate of short fiction volumes and some novels. In

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this period his stories and articles were published in *Quadrant*, *The Bulletin* and the *Women's Weekly*.

His literary output since 1981 is quite large as shown by the articles in both the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* and Thorpe's *Who's Who of Australian Writers*. Ten volumes of short stories have been published including *Laughing Gunner* which received the prestigious Best Christian Book of the Year Award 1933 given by the Australian Christian Literature Society. His novel *Tall Grow the Tallow-woods*, had received the same award in 1992. His medieval novel *Strong as the Sun*. has had wide acceptance and its sequel *Beyond Mortal Love* is soon to be printed It will be followed by a comprehensive contemporary novel with an Australian setting, entitled *Under the Pear Tree*. His two volumes of poetry are *The Spirit of All Things* and *All Things of The Spirit*.

Geoffrey has had notable acceptance by The Australian Broadcasting Commission over many years and is often demand as a speaker and lecturer. Quite an amount of his material is included in Rob Linn's recent book and CD Rom *Their Sacrifice*, published by Open Book for the Australia Remembers 1945-95 Celebrations. Public and School libraries say that Bingham's books rarely remain on their shelves, being in demand by both young and old readers.

Often in demand both in Australasia and internationally as a teacher, he has also written many theological works, some of them quite popular. He achieved the degree of Th.D in 1990 for his thesis *Divine and Human Relationships* which is, as yet, unpublished, although a number of books on personall counselling have been issued . He has also

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created a unique genre—a book with a mixture of stories, poems and essays. He has published nine of these. At 76 his health is astonishingly good and his literary output is steadily increasing.