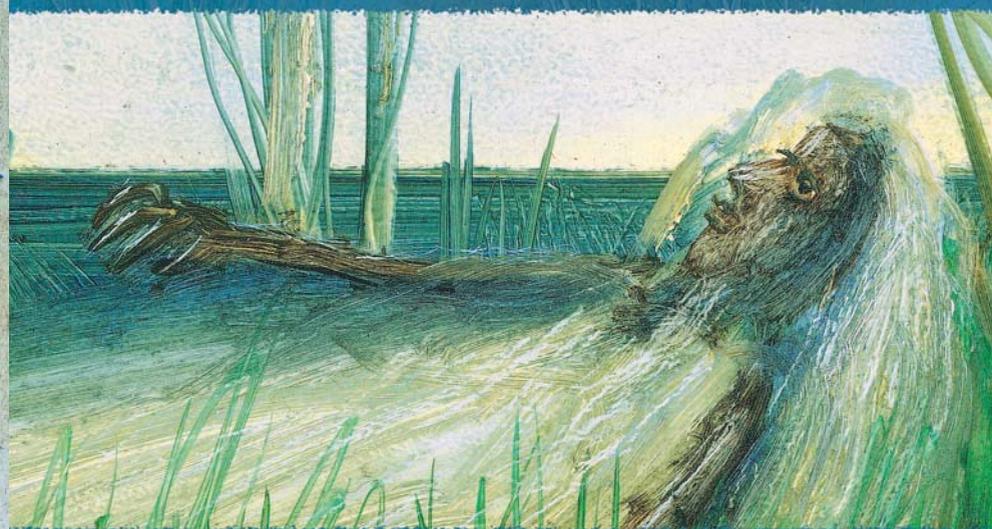


Geoffrey Bingham has been writing short stories since he was in short pants. His first published story was in 1941 when he was in Malaya with the 8th Division of the AIF. Since 1945 when he was a prolific writer for *The Bulletin* and other journals, he has had many volumes of short stories published, along with some novels.

This present book covers about eighty years of his life and so is vintage writing. His stories always seem to appeal to young and old, and this volume should attract further appreciation. Some of the stories may appeal only to the poetically minded for there is more than a touch of fantasy in a number of them. Often it is difficult to distinguish fantasy from fact. Even so, the menu is quite varied and most readers will be satisfied.

The Rev. Geoffrey Bingham, an Anglican clergyman, a teacher of interstate and international experience, has been a missionary with the Church Missionary Society, Principal of the Pakistan Bible Institute and of the Bible College of South Australia, and Executive Director of New Creation Ministries.

No Life without Dryads



Geoffrey C. Bingham

By the same author

Short Stories

The Boy in the Valley

The Boy, the Girl, and the Man

Laughing Gunner

The Lion on the Road

Mr Hicken's Pears

Mr Piffy Comes Home

The Raymond Connection

The Return of the Lorikeets

To Command the Cats

Novels

Beyond Mortal Love

Strong as the Sun

Tall Grow the Tallow-woods

No Life without Dryads

Geoffrey C. Bingham

New Creation Publications Inc.

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<i>Foreword</i>	<i>ix</i>
The Fall and Rise of Mr Deidre	1
The Hero of Waterloo and Other Things	9
A Bit of Garden, and Ziglag the Murderer	16
Pacific Celebration—Fifty Years On	26
Mr Gruntle Builds a House	37
Surveyor of Dreams	48
Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!	59
Comfortable Grace	69
The Chocolate Bungalow	77
Pictures of the Past	89
Pirgah	101
No Life without Dryads	115
Oh! Canola! Canola!	133
A Vagrant Memory, A Vagrant Child	148

Foreword

My first short story was published in 1941 when I was in Malaya awaiting the probable coming of the Japanese forces. What a thrill to see one's first yarn on glossy art paper and its illustrations in colour. War and those years in a Japanese Prison Camp prevented further publications until I returned to Sydney in late 1945. In the first week of return *The Bulletin* published 'Laughing Gunner' and that began a life in which publication became wide, in many papers and journals. *The Bulletin*, alone, took thirty-four stories in five years, but that run came to an end when the direction of my life changed. It was not until 1980 that a volume of my short stories *To Command the Cats* was published. Since then nine more volumes of short stories plus a few novels have been published.

It was good to see that 1999 in opening the theme of 'The Year of the Older Person' showed the general public that men and women can be very versatile no matter what their age may be. This particular volume looks with a certain nostalgia for events of the past, and as an octogenarian, I see nothing harmful in that. Such stories also help us to understand the mind of a past generation. This book, then, will help us to develop further our understanding of those we see as aged. Let it be said that the vintage years can be best of all if we will have it that way.

I hope the stories will give pleasure to young people as well as to older folk. I can never remember when life

was not entrancing and people were not fascinating, even with all their foibles, failures and furies. It is good to draw tales from the years that have gone. Such stories tell us that no matter what our age, human beings can derive an immense amount of joy and pleasure from one another—if they will!

Again I am indebted to those who see each book through from its first typescript to its emergence from the printer and am glad to express my gratitude. A book bound is a new life set free.

*Geoffrey Bingham,
Kingswood,
South Australia
2002*

The Fall and Rise of Mr Deidre

Almost everybody knows old Mr Deidre. No: I will have to qualify that remark. Almost everybody knows Mr Deidre's flowers, even though some have never met the grower nor know his name. They do know about him for they see his garden and anticipate his special shows of flowers. His winter flowers are cinerarias and his summer flowers are petunias. So you will hear folk talking about them at the appropriate season. In winter they say, 'Have you seen that old chap's cinerarias this year? They are his best ever', or, 'Have you ever seen a show of petunias like the display he has this summer?'

Not too many know his name is Archie Deidre, but a lot of folk know him by sight, for they have seen him poring over his special bed which is on the front righthand side of his stone villa, just before you get to the shopping centre. I wouldn't have known his name except that my wife is a busybody and has introduced herself to him and he has come to like her. You will doubtless think I am rude calling her a 'busybody', but that is what she is, even if perhaps the kindest of her species on the earth. She likes people, loves to talk to them, finds self-introductions no problem, and somehow encourages her new friends with plenty of bright stimulation.

If you live in our Adelaide suburb, you also will know the flower garden of which I am speaking. If you are thoughtful you will know just about the day the petunia seedlings will be planted in spring and the day of the cineraria in autumn. You too will watch their growth with some kind of eagerness, and then one day, lo! you will see the first rich colours peeping out, soon to resolve themselves into a glorious riot of colour, a fantastic display.

I, myself, have seen them. I too am a gardener of sorts, and I go in for a variety of annuals, biennials and perennials, including small flowering shrubs. In my heart of hearts I have to agree that Archie Deidre's displays beat the best I can do. With some reluctance I admit to myself—though not to others—that this man is a champion gardener.

Mind you, his garden is somewhat small, I suppose about three square metres, but he has gradually accumulated some fine terracotta pots, quite large in size, and a couple of white urns, perhaps given to him by some admiring Greeks; I am not sure. Together garden, pots and urns never fail to attract people's eyes, and they, too, are impelled to chat about the flowers with the old man if he wills to be seen. He is not always in his front garden, but if he is you might hear this stereotyped greeting by his friends.

'Ah, there Archie, what a show of cinerarias! What a mass of colour! What a beautiful variety! Beats even last year's flowers! I've never seen some of those colours before in any cinerarias.'

Of course they are right. I haven't either, and maybe you'll excuse me for being a trifle aggrieved. It is not for want of trying that my colours do not equal his. It is not that I haven't gone through plant and garden sections of nurseries and supermarkets and the like, seeking out the very best of beauties. Sure, mine make a show and

even draw remarks from this person and that, but Archie always out-shows all others.

No matter. I have my fun in other ways, and have abandoned my envy for other interests. I doubt whether even a quiver of jealousy could be raised in me if, in the New Year or Queen's Birthday Honours Lists, the name of Archibald Deidre were to be mentioned for the Order of Australia, or the Medal of the Order of Australia.

Well, enough of my comments. I have to tell you with little joy that last year's cineraria season became a disaster for our gardening friend. Not that he hadn't selected the best seedlings he could find and that money could buy. Normally he saves his own seed, germinates it in a polystyrene vegetable or fruit box, and then when they are the right size, pricks out the seedlings and plants them in his famous plot, pots and urns. Because, against his custom, he bought his seedlings last year, and was satisfied with the colours the little plastic stickers promised, he planted them all according to custom. He was also satisfied as they grew. No woolly caterpillar disturbed or munched them because of the secret organic pesticide our Archie used. All seemed set for another season's display of splendour.

It was my wife who broke the sad news to me. 'Poor old Archie!' she said on returning home from the fitness centre, and our special shopping centre.

My mind was on other things, so I missed the nuance of gossip. Beside I had my hearing aid turned off.

'The dear old man!' she said sympathetically.

I thought Archie must have died, or at least have fallen for the dreaded lurgy—the illness that waits to seize upon innocent, ambling pensioners.

'Gone and got the new strain of Asian flu?' I opined.

She shook her head impatiently. 'Much worse than that!' she said.

I knew I had to cease from my own private thinking and pay attention.

'What happened?' I asked mildly.

'His cinerarias', she said sharply. 'There has been a tragedy.'

'Woolly caterpillars', I said, nodding. 'Thought that one day that might happen, even to Archie's marvellous plants.'

She gave her expressive snort, and an impatient wave of her right hand. She looked at me, despairing of my hearing. I switched on the hearing aid.

Then she told me the terrible news. 'Poor Mr Deidre has dwarf and giant cineraria growing together.'

For a moment the problem did not percolate into my ageing brain. Then it did!

'Good heavens!' I breathed, as though Archie had suddenly discovered brucellosis or Mad Cow Disease amongst some dairy herd he might have owned. Even as I talked the enormity of it broke upon me. I could see his flowers—large blooming giant cinerarias dwarfing the already dwarf variety of the same species. I could see the unevenness of the short, dwarf variety struggling up against the tall, giant variety, but doomed to bloom unseen beneath the large fleshy leaves.

'I feel sorry for him', I said earnestly. Not one jot or tittle of delight was in my mind. I genuinely grieved for Archie.

I don't know how the man endured the season. He could have removed the lot of the plants, but then his soil, pots and urns would have been empty. He could have singled out the large or the small plants, but it would have been a ragged scene. Foiled, he let them grow, but somehow the showing was not a success. Archie kept out of sight or went on bus tours with the

pensioners, or just drank in the RSL Club: I do not know. It was a sort of mini-scandal, but sympathy was not lacking.

Now comes the unbelievable part of my tale. I was passing the Deidre house, scarcely glancing at the garden for fear its owner may have been looking through a window, marking out those who gloried in his loss. This was not the case. Archie suddenly opened the front door and beckoned to me. Surprised, I opened the gate and walked in, down the smooth path of pavers, and was on the front verandah, but still at a bit of a loss as to why I had been invited.

He gestured towards a cane chair, and I sat in it. He drew up another and sat. Then he looked into my eyes and grinned.'

'You're Connie's husband, aren't you?' he asked.

Surprised, I nodded. His grin grew even wider. 'I know 'em all', he confided. 'Maybe they think they know me, but then I know them. Your missus is a stunner. Always got a good word for everyone.'

He tripled his grin, 'Even for you', he said. His smirk seemed set for the entire time of our conversation.

He gave an uncaring wave towards his cineraria disaster.

'Quite shocked me', he said, remembering the horrific event of discovery. 'Made me real depressed it did.' He nodded heavily.

'Ah, well', he said with a faint sigh. 'Always a silver side to the cloud, eh?'

I thought we were going to have a splurge of cliches, but no, this time Archie was out to tell me something.

He drew his chair closer, looked up at me with opalescent eyes of blue, and began his story. His hands were folding over each other, rubbing themselves together as though warming up for some event.

‘You see’, he said, ‘I was walking home this afternoon when it happened. I admit I was feeling down quite a bit. It’s six years since Emily died. She and I were always pretty close, and much more so near the end. I was feeling it quite a lot and knowing I would have to cook my own meals again. Can’t say I would ever want to have Meals on Wheels, so I was feeling a lot of pity for myself.’

He nodded towards the spent cinerarias and shook his head. ‘I was thinking about them too, and all the joy I had deprived my friends of, and just because those seedling people had not put “dwarf” or “giant” on their labels, and then in the middle of my self-pity I heard a bird in the tree above me. I looked up and blow me down if it wasn’t a budgerigar. Even from where I was standing I could see it was a lovely silver-blue and white colour. Gave me quite a start, it did.’

‘I kept staring at it. After a few minutes of looking at me it flew down and landed on my left shoulder. I stood still, and it crept up to my neck. I thought it was maybe going to pull hairs out of my head, but it wasn’t after that. It just nibbled at my ears. Didn’t bite, either. I thought it was playing with me. So it was. I didn’t know what to do. In my heart I hoped it wouldn’t fly back into the tree. I wasn’t game to try to catch it with my hands.’

‘I felt I was paralysed, frozen to the footpath, so to speak. Then, slowly I began walking. Instead of flying off it seemed to like that and began chattering away. I was staggered by the words that came out, and bits of songs and things.’

‘By this time I had reached my gate. I walked down the path and opened the front door, just as you see it now. No bother to the budgie. He didn’t mind when I walked in and closed the door. Matter of fact he got quite excited as though he was glad to be home. He flew

around the room, and then he landed again on my shoulder, nibbled my ear, and went on saying things into my ear as though he were telling secrets.

‘Years ago we had had a budgie but it only ever spoke budgie things—not like this one with its large vocabulary. As a matter of fact I had left its cage hanging in the laundry when Emily died. The old budgie had died from being overfed I think, he was so fat.’

‘I cleaned the cage out, brought it in and put it on the lounge room table. The door was open, and this silver-blue and white budgie flew straight into it as though he was a pilot and a Spitfire all in one.’

‘I can tell you I was trembling all this time, and I looked at my watch, and my heart sank because it was six o’clock and all the stores would be closed. Then a brilliant thought struck me: it was Thursday evening, late-night shopping, you know, so I told Silver-Blue to wait a bit and I shot off to Foodland, and bought some budgie mixture.’

‘Was he excited? I tell you he was. Maybe he hadn’t had a true feed for some time, being domesticated, so I put in a small container of seed and another of water, and he was into it in no time. I cooked my scotch fillet of steak, mashed my potatoes and added the green peas and orange coloured carrots and opened a new tin of fruit salad and put ice-cream on it.’

He looked at me. ‘Boy, did we have a night? He was eating a bit and drinking a bit and chewing on the carrot tops, and I was laughing fit to kill, and he was in the same mood, and you couldn’t have seen anything more hilarious.’

He stopped talking. There were tears in his eyes and he was doing some heavy breathing.

‘What do you think of all that?’ he asked.

‘Better than beautiful cinerarias’, I said, sensing this was a good thing to say.

He nodded in agreement. Then he went into a slight reverie. 'I bet Emily would think that, too', he said.

'You're a fortunate man', I said, not knowing what else to say.

'You can say that again', he said, and then a thought struck him. 'Come right in and see my new companion', he said.

So I went right in and I knew he had not exaggerated about the bird. Believe it or not, I had been both a breeder and judge of budgerigars many years before, and here I beheld one of the best show birds I had seen in a long time. Maybe it sized me up as a budgie-loving type because it began a furious bout of shrill whistling, low throaty warbling, sibilant chattering, and antics that are the sign of a healthy member of the tiny parakeet species. One might have envied Archie or felt sorry for the original owner who had put in so much training to this beloved pet, but as it was, it just liked being in the centre of a small social miracle: the rise of a gardener from his blooming demise.

As I went home I thought to myself, 'Flowers are very beautiful but they are not social creatures. This Silver-Blue has gotten to the heart of the old man, and life will mean more to him, even, than petunias and what one might call "failed cinerarias".'

Connie agreed with me heartily, but she kept looking at me sideways, as though I might have invented the whole thing. Of course I had not, even though at other times I do use my imagination in the writing of short stories.

The Hero of Waterloo and Other Things

We—my two sisters and I—are on the second floor of our three-storeyed building which is our home, and we are looking through the window, down at the hotel called The Hero of Waterloo. My name is Richard and I am eight years of age. My sister Carol is six and Anne, our little sister, is three. It is not easy to get a full look into the bar of that pub, but you can see enough to keep you interested. Sometimes it is a bit scary, like the time we saw one sailor smash an empty beer bottle on the bar counter and try to rip the face of another person who also had a bottle like his, all broken but held by the neck. That left a deep feeling in me, but thank goodness others stopped them both from fighting. I don't think I shall ever forget it. Strange things happen in The Hero of Waterloo and the other ten pubs around our way.

It is not always frightening because, although the place we live in is what people call 'the slums', yet the people here are very good to one another. They seem to like us no matter how rough they are. They are not all rough, either. There is young Dennis, whose father works in the city and is always very well-dressed. Dennis thinks that one day he will escape from our area which is called The Rocks and is very famous for the razor gangs it used to have. They tell me there were lots of bodies around in those days, and people got killed

quite easily. People that grow up here hardly ever leave the place, they like it so much. Dennis says he will be different. He will.

Our house is always open. Anyone can come in who wants to, and some do. Some are sailors who live in the houses provided by the Harbour Trust. The houses are all what they called 'terraced'. I have heard my Mum say that is what they are, streets of houses joined together, and all having at least two floors if not three. Our house, as I said, has three floors. My sisters and I hardly ever go to the top one which is called an attic for we think an old man might be living there, or even a ghost. Fancy having a ghost in a rectory! A rectory is where a minister lives, generally with his family. My Dad is a minister, full of fun. Don't let anyone tell you ministers are not full of fun.

Mind you, sometimes he is very serious. This is when he is in church, particularly when he is preaching. When I was very little I used to follow him around, hanging onto his robes, even when he was up in the part where they have the Communion. He never seemed to mind, but my Mum used to collect me and take me back to the pews. Now one of my sisters hangs over the pew looking down, or over the back of the pew looking down that way. She makes all kinds of queer faces, especially when my Dad is preaching. When he preaches she really gets active. She keeps looking up at him, making these faces.

I have heard some people call my Dad the engine-driver. He goes up into the pulpit with his big Bible, puts it on the place where it is supposed to rest and then he goes to town, working away with his right arm. They call him the engine-driver because he keeps waving his hand up and down as they do at Central Station when the engine-driver is telling the guard away back

at the end of the train that he is starting the train going. In a way my Dad is starting things going. The people listening never get bored. These are the times he gets serious, but then he tells a joke and people start laughing, right there in the church, and when they are laughing fit to burst, he gets serious, and they stop laughing, and I guess he has them, right there.

I like to hear him preaching. It is my idea of something pretty powerful. Some of my mates tell me it is a bit strange my being a preacher's kid, but I tell them I like it, and I stand up for my Dad, but inside I get mad if they think I am queer just because my father is a preacher. I act as tough as any kid can act, short of shoplifting at Woolworths, for while I see some of them doing that, I won't. I like to go around to the factories where we get broken chocolates and comics which have been a bit spoilt in the printing. One way and another we get food of different kinds. Down in Wynyard Ramp we get donuts that have not turned out perfectly, or have gone a bit stale. In the bakers' shops they sometimes give us buns. The older boys do raids on factories, but the police soon pick them up. We give those things a miss.

We are small kids who get around like a gang, and yet we are not tough. Not as tough as the old razor gangs, but then they were older than us. There are older kids who make a sort of a gang, but my Dad has got amongst them. You would never guess how. Well, he and my Mum and some others went out on the streets and invited these tough kids into the church hall. The church helpers had quite a feast ready, and they talked strong after the party, and told them they would soon build a basketball court, and that they needn't think religion was religious. It was different from that.

It is strange, but then the older kids like it. They are still at school and too young for the pubs, so they are

glad to come together, and why not at the church hall, where they can play all kinds of games. They can also do physical training which is a bit of a hobby my Dad had, because he had been in the Army and taught the men to box and wrestle and do gymnastics. You know he has been in the Army by the way he shouts orders and keeps the kids playing without fights. No one can blow a whistle like my Dad.

He got the City Council to put down asphalt over the hard, bare ground and after that he and some other men marked out our basketball court which we also use for playing other games. Inside the hall we have badminton and table tennis and other games. He also teaches us how to defend ourselves in boxing but isn't too keen about serious fighting where the boys would lose their tempers. My Mum helps the girls a lot. She has been a Brownie and a Guide and a special swimmer. Once she saved a girl from drowning and got a medal. The girls like her a lot.

My Mum is really as famous as my Dad. Some Sundays she has up to twenty in for lunch. There is always a lot of noise and laughing going on, and joking. Once one of my sisters wished we would just have the meal as a family, and one day she got angry and threw her plate of food on the floor. My Dad stared at her and asked her why she did that.

'I wanted to get attention', she said, and that was true.

Lots of people have our Dad's attention. Mum makes up a lot for that in our family, but on the whole we are proud of our Dad, especially the way he handles all sorts of people, like straight-out drunks, or metho-drinkers, or people who have no money and nowhere to sleep. They used to think he was a softie because he was a minister, but he would talk to them quite a lot and they would go away. Now only the really bad cases

come, and my Dad helps them. Some of them sleep behind the incinerator at the back of the old church. My Dad goes up each morning and gets them moving.

'It's for their own good', he sometimes tells me, but there are times I see him quite sad in the eyes. He is also sad when he goes to some homes, for very few of the families have both a dad and a mum, or the right dad or the right mum, if you know what I mean. Hardly anyone is ever mean to my Dad, and he can go anywhere, night and day, but he always wears his minister's collar, and people seem to respect that a lot. My Mum laughs and says my Dad has a special rubber collar and the black bit of cloth that goes with it which he wears under the shower so that he always has a collar on; but that is a bit of a joke. She often tells that to people and my Dad laughs.

Sometimes the sailors from the Burns, Philp Shipping Line come to our church. To begin with they used to be a bit drunk, and noisy, but when they saw my Dad as the engine-driver and listened to him they got converted and became quite different. They gave up the beer and the shouting and the smoking and other things. Now they sing in the church, up the front, in a special way. Dad says they get into a circle as though they are going to play two-up with two pennies. They put their heads down, look at the floor and then they start to sing. You never forget that kind of singing. My Dad says it is all in quarter tones, but he cannot explain what quarter tones are. It must be what they sing in heaven because my Dad calls them black angels, and everyone loves what they do, and for some minutes after the singing we are all silent. Of course this only happens when the Burns, Philp ships put into Sydney Harbour.

There are lots of stories I could tell you about my Mum and Dad, but one of the best is how my father got

Laurie to church. He has what my Dad calls a beer belly, and he is a Communist which everyone thinks is a bad thing. He is also a wharfie and goes in peace marches for banning the bomb, and he wants my Dad to join these marches, but my Dad says no bargaining. Laurie can come to church if he likes but no bargaining either way. Laurie beats up his wife and is tough with his kids. He says he is an atheist which my Dad says is a person who hates the God he says doesn't exist.

One night the police caught his boy, young Allan, breaking into a factory, and he was going to be up before the courts. Laurie came to my Dad for help, but my Dad said it was his fault that Allan was the way he was, Laurie's family having such little peace and fun and love. Dad said he would only help if Laurie would do something to make things better for the home. I think he is trying to make things better. After a time Laurie came to church. He says he still doesn't believe in God but he sometimes reads the lesson from the Bible. At those times he is well-dressed and never drunk.

Before I finish I must tell you the effect Dad has on some people. He gets some of the older people and friends to go out into the streets and get people to come into church. Some young ladies who are nurses and teachers like to come to our church, so they help. Some they invite have never been to church in their lives, and they ask when interval is as they wish to have a smoke or a drink. They seem to like it all, and when the service is over my Dad and our men and women get the visitors to go across to the hall where we have supper. Each Sunday we seem to get more and more coming.

I like to stand at the back and watch what happens. I am getting good at knowing when some are about to be converted. Afterwards I tell my Dad who was nearly converted or who got converted, and my Dad smiles at me with a strange smile, different to other times. Once

I told him I might do this sort of thing when I was grown up. There is something quite special about the engine-driving preaching.

There are lots of things I could tell you but the last one is about us three kids, Allan and Archie and me, going up onto the pylons of the Harbour Bridge. Next time you go on to the bridge which is just above Dad's church, if you look up you will see that up near the top there is a kind of ledge around the pylon. It is so narrow you have to work your way around it. The three of us dare each other to go around it.

We go around it. It is best not to look down when you are doing this because it is a long way down to the bottom, to the road below the bridge. The trams and the trains are roaring and thundering across on their steel rails, and all the cars and trucks are moving along the roads. From up here where we are, even the church looks tiny. I can see the three-storeyed house in which we live, but it is best not to look down too much. You have to press yourself against the stone of the pylon and move very carefully.

Sometimes you get strange thoughts, like what would happen if you fell. You would certainly be quite a mess and completely dead. Lots of things my Dad has said come to me at those times. Some things my Mum says also, especially about what happens to dead people. If ever my Dad finds out what we do on this pylon he would give me a belting. Of that I am sure.

That is why I have left it for a long time before I am telling this part of the story. In fact there is a lot more to the story. Mostly I keep thinking about The Hero of Waterloo and what we see at night times when we look down into it. As I said, it's a bit scary when men break bottles on the counter and then go to slash each other's faces with them. Churches and pubs seem so different to me, and maybe that will be my next story.

A Bit of Garden, and Ziglak the Murderer

I generally weed the garden seated on a coir door mat. It is most comfortable that way, especially if there is room within the garden to do so. A mild affliction of osteoporosis prevents me bending from the standing position. In fact I like weeding the garden, seated, not only because the garden looks better when weeded, but also because weeding proves one of the best times for meditation.

My first bit of meditation was about the new garden claw that one of our seed and plant firms has acquired from the patentee. It is so useful that I wrote to the firm telling them that they missed certain of its beauties in their advertising. It is the first letter I have written in my life to a business, suggesting they advertise these added, recommended excellencies. I guess it takes time to get the advertising side operating in a new way, since weeks have passed and no letter of blazing appreciation has reached me. For your curiosity's sake I'll tell what I suggested. I suggested it is an excellent tool for aged people who cannot bend, dare not dig, but whose arms are strong enough to turn the handles of the implements. The claw loosens the soil in easy fashion, and this had been well advertised. My main point was that it loosened weeds at their roots and that weeding became a cinch for those who otherwise would

be daunted from weeding, especially the aged and osteoporetic who love gardening.

Seated on my coir matting my thoughts began to wander. I remembered that as a boy I thought flower gardens were sissy, and flower gardeners no less. I attended an agricultural training school and some could opt to do horticulture but the he-men were all for cereal crops, vegetables and orchards. My father was quite masculine in my eyes and he had planted hundreds of rose trees, so I supposed rose trees were less sissy than other flower plants. Even so, I liked displays of flowers. It was just that I didn't want to grow them. Now, of course, I am growing them. A few years previously I had handled over an acre of vegetable garden, but now this is beyond me. I have discovered flowers!

So my mind meandered about gardens, remembering the most beautiful I had seen. Come to think of it, just about all people like flower gardens, even if they can't afford the time to create and keep them. On my local walks I gaze eagerly into gardens, appreciating the care that goes into some of them and am a bit disgusted where people neglect them. I have realised that Eden—the original garden paradise—is still there in human memory. Why else would people—even those of the worst ilk—try to make some bit of a garden? Why do most people—business folk or otherwise—try to grow shrubs and trees, to say nothing of lawns and flowers, in order to hide the buildings and houses they make? All of us have an instinct for arbours, leafy alcoves and gazebos covered with vines, lattices of roses and trellised flowers. Why do we make our miniature rainforests, and plan flowing landscapes beset with pools, fountains and other beauty? Doubtless it is all nostalgia for Eden.

Having theologised the matter of gardens I tugged at the weeds whose roots had been loosened by the clever

garden claw. It is just that—a steel claw with twisted tines held firmly on a main steel stem which has handles to turn the soil and loosen the weeds. It was most satisfactory, sitting on my mat and pulling away at the claw-loosened weeds, putting them in a plastic receptacle to be later piled into my shining new wheelbarrow. As I meditated I knew this bit of garden story was not the stuff of great blockbuster novels, nor even of stirring short fiction. Flowers and fiction!—they never did go well.

I have had my moments in such writing—tough action, war stories and lurid accounts of prison days—but I have run out of these. So I surmised in my coir contemplation until I remembered we had gardens in our Japanese Prisoner of War camps. I do not mean the official gardens in which prisoners worked and which were fertilised by our human faeces. These gardens first supplied the guards with vegetables and fruit, and we would have the leftovers—everything received with gratitude.

No: I am talking about our own personal strips of soil which grew between the huts and the rubber trees, for we lived on a plantation. We tried to grow a little extra to stave off hunger pains, and so we planted greens. When they came to a somewhat wan maturity we would stir-fry them in homemade pans in palm oil, or boil them in a tin. They were no less than delicious. The problem was that the soil had been leached out by the daily tropical rains. We had to supply some fertiliser and it had to be our urine. Outside of each hut were one or more 'rose-bowls'—the Army name for urine drums. Because of beri-beri, most of us had to relieve our bladders many times during the night. In the morning there would be a rush to get the best of the rose-bowls to pour on our poor garden beds. Somehow something was induced to grow.

I thought about all that on my humble door mat. I remembered without bitterness that some prisoners filched from these personal gardens, but pity help the fellow caught!

My mind wandered to its next garden bit. The day before, I had finished reading the walloping large autobiography of Nelson Mandela. No one should miss reading this. Not only is it so easy to read, but it is also a gentle book for all its accounts of revolutionary thinking and acting. Mandela must go down in human annals as one of the finest of men, and one of the most mature in thinking. Those of us who had dreaded internecine slaughter, that we surmised must surely come out of the South African connection, are still in the throes of astonishment and delight for what has emerged from this man's leadership. Doubtless the credit must also go to so many of his fellow workers and supporters, but Nelson Mandela has greatness and deserved the Nobel Peace Prize which his efforts have won.

What I remembered on my little mat as I stuffed uprooted summer grass into the plastic receptacle was that this man had loved gardens. He had loved them not only in his boyhood home patch where the family grew both vegetables and flowers, but also in the wider world of his village Mvezo and the province of Transkei. The rural life he knew there was interrupted by a rare opportunity for educational training, and his becoming a lawyer. He was also cut off from it by imprisonment on Robben Island. He knew hard days in some three decades of imprisonment, but his powerful, personal being brought some amelioration to the conditions under which political prisoners had to work.

It was when that amelioration took place that he conceived of using much of his time in making a garden. On such a rock-bound island it seemed impossible, but

the account of how he made that garden, and the delight it gave him and others, needs to be read time and again by indolent folk who forget the human race originated in a garden!

Eventually Mandela was transferred to another prison, Pollsmoor, and to his dismay there was no opportunity for making a garden. There was only a concrete courtyard. Nelson asked for sixteen forty-four-gallon drums which were sliced in half for him. These half drums were filled with good soil. It was purely a vegetable garden, with every kind of vegetable you could name, and tallied nine hundred plants.

On my little mat I pondered as might have a Mahatma Gandhi. What would these gardens have done for this man, to say nothing of what they might have done for his warders, prison governors, and fellow prisoners? How could the prison powers think of him as a desperate and murderous fellow?

Murderous fellow! My mind went back over three decades to Pakistan, and I remembered a murderous fellow. Strange how such memories flick up in your mind when they have been so long dormant. I will call him Ziglak so that none may find him out, even after these many years. This man came to our theological training centre in the Sindh Province of South Pakistan, asking for admission as a student. I am not a short person, but this fellow soared above me. He was thin, very dark-skinned, with long hands and feet, gleaming eyes, a proud mien: a hard-pressing person. He looked to be what the men called *jungli*—jungly, of the jungle, wild, crude, ignorant. Above all he wanted to be a student.

I guess he was in his late thirties. He was a Christian, but like so many of his ilk, Christian in name, which meant he sometimes attended a church but still held to much of the ancient culture which was linked

with the occult. He was a Punjabi, tough and rude and quite belligerent. He could read a little but not much. He was not anxious to tell us his life story, or why he was a thousand miles south of his own village. None of these things mattered, anyway.

I asked him what he could do. He said, 'I am a farmer'. That could mean anything. It could mean he was a peasant, a feudal worker, or it could mean he had owned land and farmed it. When we worked in our vegetable garden he worked with us, and seemed to love the toil.

I have forgotten many of the details. I fancy that he could not keep up with the study course and dropped out. I think that was when we made him our official gardener. In summer it was difficult to grow anything because the heat would be daily up to at least 115 degrees Fahrenheit and often to 120 degrees. The Muslims had a proverb about our Province, the Sindh: 'O Allah, when You made the Sindh, what need was there to make hell?' The proverb was close to the mark. However, the temperature dropped during the winter as low as 85 degrees, and that was when we would renew our gardens.

This was the time when Ziglak came to life. One day he came to me, almost giggling, and asked with huge excitement, 'How would Sahib like a true English garden?' Sahib had seen a few of these in Australia and they were heavens and havens for butterflies which the child Sahib used to catch and arrange in his insect collection. He had also seen them in English journals, but was not Ziglak a bit *pargle*—crazy—thinking he could make such a garden in the Sindh? He thought he was not.

We watched him at his work, taking old soil out of the rocky bed, removing all rocks, refilling with the old soil and then the new soil specially purchased by us. He had developed some fine compost which he mixed with the soil. He soaked the plot with the water that flowed into our compound from the Sindh River. He had

developed seed boxes, each with its variety of what he called 'Ungrezi'—English—plants.

It was at that time I discovered Ziglak was a murderer. The students knew the whole story. It was a very complicated tale, for it had to do with many things, most of which I could not understand since they were primarily cultural.

'He has a terrible temper, Sahib', they said to me. 'You must watch him. He could murder anyone.'

'Anyone' might include our young children, but Ziglak adored them and was ever so gentle with them.

I was troubled about Ziglak. In Pakistan the arm of the law is long, and it is not easy for a man to get away with murder. I knew enough to know that it had to do with land and relatives, and that some injustice had been done to Ziglak and his family. I worried about him, wondering whether I should send him away. What puzzled me was that the longer he was with us, the gentler he became and the more his eyes enlarged and softened, like those of a loyal dog.

Up to that point I had never questioned Ziglak about his gardening. Now I did. When he came with his boxes of plants he began to plant them out. They were about six inches apart in the row, and the rows were six inches distant from one another. I dared not laugh at the man. He insisted on his dignity as though it mattered most to him, which it probably did since he was semi-literate. He could scarcely understand Urdu, even though I spoke it well. One had to go into jungly Punjabi to be understood. One of the students translated for me.

I was saying, 'Those plants are too closely planted Ziglak'.

'No, Sahib', he said assertively. 'That's how English gardens are.'

I had to listen to him repeat for the umpteenth time how he had been taught English gardening by a missionary at the Taxila Hospital. Since there was nothing I could do I shrugged my shoulders, smiled faintly and walked off.

Each day I would look at the plants. They seemed to grow overnight. I marvelled at how thoughtful had been Ziglak's choice. Thinking about it on my little mat whilst I hauled out scads of weeds, I remembered the shortest variety—pansies—was planted at the front of the garden, and the tallest—foxgloves I think—at the rear. That was how they grew—from pansies to foxgloves: terraced flowers you might call them, tier upon tier.

The strange thing is that they seemed to come to flower about the same time and when they did they were not the inhibited, scrawny flowers I thought they would become because planted close together. Since those days I have seen similar gardens, and similar planting. Indeed, I learned from Ziglak and his Taxila missionary, and fair enough have been my gardens and the gardens of others, but none—no, not one—to compare with the murderer's garden.

Folk came from everywhere to look at that garden. It was our delight and joy and Ziglak's no less. When folk praised the brilliant show he almost hugged himself with delight. Always badly dressed in rarely washed chemise and *dhoti*—villager's garb—he now dressed in white and shining *shalwar-cumeez*—the dress of the prosperous and the dignified. You could say that that garden made the gardener into a new person. Each bit of praise gave him a confidence he had lacked. He was different when he met people, and he sang with assurance in the worship meetings, and finally pleaded to be allowed—and helped—to become fully literate.

So I mused on my humble coir mat. Ziglak became a competent volleyball player. Being so tall he could stand near the net and manage a great shoot into the opponents' court, battering down his ball with unstoppable speed.

It is true that the cooler winter breeze barely ruffled that marvellous display of blooms. It simply brought their glorious colours to more life and movement, and further thrilled our watching eyes. Because of the garden we all shared in Ziglak's fame. Then, of course, the cool winter wind changed to a summer *loo*—the harsh, hot wind which comes blowing in from the burning desert. Before it everything shrivels, except of course the irrigated *barghs* (gardens) and orchards which—tradition has it—are scattered elements of Eden, and foretastes of the holy Eden to come.

So Ziglak's flowers curled up and died, but not before they podded and seeded and gave the proud man seeds for his next winter's garden. The emptying of the garden did not mean the decline of Ziglak the murderer. Far from it. He lived from winter to winter on the anticipation of another beautiful garden. He learned to read the Urdu Bible, and added to the one hundred and fifty psalms he could already sing in jungly Punjabi. More than that I do not know; nor do I know what happened to him. I believe some reconciliation was made in his village concerning the murder. I suspect the police were glad not to have to seek him out. The man was altered beyond comparison with the days when first we had met him. He was no longer jungly.

I pondered him further on my little mat, and thought that since a thief on a cross was told that he was forgiven and would, that very day, be with the other crucified man 'in a garden', that I could safely leave Ziglak to the mercy of the same Person. The word 'garden' that

the Person used to the bandit beside him is the word for 'Paradise', coming from the Persian *pairidaesa*. I knew, of course, that all history will end up in a garden in which there flows the river of life, and whose trees are not limited by seasons of harsh, drying *loos*, but which will yield their fruit monthly, and that the leaves of the tree of life will be for the healing of the nations. To date no one has produced such an effective prescription!

Because of a gammy leg I received in the Second World War, it was a bit of an effort to turn on the mat, and then to rise from it—my osteoporosis being no great help—but once up I looked at the garden my wife and I had developed. I thought it a curious thing that I had designed it on the principle of a gardener who had been a murderer, and in company with a man who had risen through seemingly impossible conditions to be the President of a great nation, South Africa. I think I teetered on the edge of writing a poem about it all, but instead I picked up my container of weeds to pile them in the compost bin. With the weeds I also carried the conviction that the most powerful stories are not always the ones of mystery, mayhem and intrigue. Quiet, gentle and useful stories can be to do with gardens. Nelson Mandela and Ziglak the erstwhile murderer can bear testimony to that!

Should you ever visit us, especially in the spring, you may see something like an English garden of annuals, each variety and species shown layer upon layer and tier upon tier. Maybe you favour a wholly indigenous garden, and you could be right. Myself, I favour things both exotic and indigenous—all things which go to make universal beauty.

Pacific Celebration— Fifty Years On

They are saying a lot about fifty years after the war, about the fiftieth anniversary, and I am hearing them. I am hearing through and above the things pressing around me which are of the present. For example, the writing of a book, teaching others out of what little I know, and the extras, like being a husband, a father, a grandfather.

It is she, Laurel my wife, who is interested in the ‘Australia Remembers’ celebrations. So a friend of ours has composed a CD-ROM. I hardly knew what a CD-ROM was until I saw it on the computer where I was being interviewed by Rob Linn the historian who is its maker. His book titled *Their Sacrifice* also helped to prime me. Laurel and I saw both productions at Government House where some hundreds of us had been invited to the launching of the CD-ROM and book.

So, then, how could I escape the fiftieth celebrations in this city of Adelaide? I rarely go to Anzac marches, since one leg is too gammy to take the distance, so I see it more easily on TV. Not today, however. She will go herself, on her own, if I won’t go; so I know I must go, and this requires a polishing of the old medals to their pristine purity pitch. Because a huge crowd is expected, we go by bus. We wait for this Route 191 vehicle, and even before we get into the bus, folk are looking at the

medals and nodding with a mite of reverence so rare in our everyday community. I respond with a modicum of embarrassment. All along the route, at each stop, folk clamber aboard and flash that look which tells us we are folk admired from the past. The next thing is that we are in Victoria Square, heart of the city of Adelaide.

I make bold to discover where we can join the parade in the luxury of a provided bus. The Army men and women see my medals, and kind of bow to me.

‘Buses? Well now, sir, things are just the same in the Army now as ever they were. Organised chaos you know! Ha! Ha! No! Wait! Sure! There will be a bus but when and where is not too certain! Look sir; look over there. That is the Chief Marshal. He should know if anyone would.’

I am pointed to the Chief Marshal. I visualise how I must look to him. An old gentleman with pure white hair, wearing a white shirt, a blue jacket with gold buttons, elegant grey slacks, and that double row of medals, one of them for bravery and a fern leaf for a Mention in Despatches. They give me a little boldness of spirit. He is tall, awesome with his Chief Marshal’s brassard. He, alone, holds the secrets. I politely interrupt his conference with less senior marshals.

‘A bus? Of course, just there sir. Not long now. You’ll see it come. Oh, by the way sir, there are the vintage Army vehicles. They will also be there. They should prove interesting.’

Armed with what we used to call ‘the griff’, we reassure a number of anxious widows who are wearing their husbands’ ribbons and medals. We even get seated in a bus, all dark-glass windows out of which we can see, but none can see us. We have always disliked anonymity, but the bus is so comfortable. We look with longing at the vintage Army vehicles; jeeps, an amphibious ‘duck’, and an assortment of trucks.

Everywhere they are getting ready for the parade. I suppose you call it a parade, a 'Remembrance Parade'. My Army mates are gathering over in one place and the men and women of the Navy and Air Force in other places. Ahead of us all will be the Police Band, its members tricked out in full ceremonial dress, including silver-piked white helmets. Their rig-out reminds me of the old colonial days, the remnants of which I have seen on the Indian subcontinent and other places. Others are deeply interested in the vintage Army vehicles, especially the amphibious duck. I am more interested in the university and college cadets, slightly amazed at the proportion of lassies tricked out in uniform. I remember my self-conscious days as a raw recruit.

In all this I am beginning to relax. To see the event through to its end was my firm resolve, mainly to please my wife. She has her memories, too, of fifty years ago when a ghastly war was suddenly concluded and she was a nurse in a Sydney Hospital. Ran up and down Martin Place, she did, with her nurse colleagues. Went crazy they did in their mad happiness. Now we are both relaxed, and comfortable in the bus.

Not for long, however. The eager Army folk crowd into our bus to tempt us out of luxury. Would we like to go in the World War II army vehicles, in the ancient jeeps, and the amphibious duck and the trucks? My mind opts for the duck, but we miss out on that. Maybe the Jeeps, then! Alas! they are bagged by Land Army girls of our own vintage but less shy and more spry. Would we ride, up high, in a truck? Would we! How would Laurel get up there? No problem: four of them lift and push and shove and assist and she is up. I have a bit of dignity to retain so I manage it myself, but then I don't have arthritis.

Now we are seated in the truck, a bit cramped up, but happy. My dignity is dissipating. I am beginning to feel human. Fifty of my seventy-six years are beginning

to dissolve. Strictly speaking, I am not back to the end of the War for it was in a Japanese Prisoner of War camp, and the Japanese Area General was refusing to surrender. No matter: here we are in calm Adelaide, and I am as young again. Laurel's eyes are roving over the massing multitude, and I think she is giggling. Also my writer's sense is on the alert. Here I might catch another story. The next fiftieth celebration is far away and probably well beyond our reach. So I turn to face the folk who will be crammed on the footpaths, looking up. I hope the vintage vehicles will lead the parade, but I dare not expect it. Of course, the Police Band will be to the fore.

I am both stunned and delighted, for the buses for the physically disabled and our old Army vehicles are going first, behind the Police Band of course. Unbelievably we are moving off, and the next thing is ticker tape floating down from the tall buildings. Few of the new buildings have windows, but the old sandstone and brick buildings come to our aid. Down from above the flutter of white paper like flat flakes of snow. Easily shred and done!

What is most surprising is the crowd we meet, caked on the edge of the footpath, crammed back almost to the shops and the offices. The eyes of all are on us. The very old, the moderately old, the middle-aged, the young and the younger and then the children to the forefront gathering up piles of shredded paper to throw and snow upon us. Streamers fly out, unrolling, bringing back memories of ocean, postwar voyage departures. None of those, of course, during the War. Then we slipped away quietly lest the enemy know of us.

On other days people tread the city footpaths with solemnity, curved into themselves, unsmiling. Today everyone is smiling. People want to smile: the smiling is genuine. The children are laughing and so the adults laugh. It is fun to laugh! It is a day of great glee. The

children have no respect for my white hair and my natural dignity. They cast handfuls of ticker tape, made into paper snowballs, and shriek hysterically if they hit me or my wife, but smiles are breaking out in me and Laurel and our truckful of veterans. I have not seen so many people together in years. Later they will tell us 73,000 have come in from every city and town and hamlet in the State.

Then I see tears. I see faces passionate with pain and pride. To some we are remnants of other proud days, and suddenly, afresh, they sense sacrifice. Maybe some are weeping because a husband or wife, a grandparent or a parent has gone beyond their ken. Maybe they are just proud because so many can be so interested when, for a long time, small rivulets of life and pride had been almost lost in the wide continent, dry it was assumed, of national joy and delight at the valiant efforts of fighting men and women. Suddenly they are realising a nation has not been asleep nor dry in its spirit. It has just lacked the opportunity to express itself. Today inhibitions are cast off, but not for some inane Dionysian revel, but for a celebration of the greatness the human spirit can know in its finest hours.

So we battle with the children and their paper bombs and their streamers, and the adults further back who are in the streamer-casting business and as delighted as children when one reaches us and we grasp it, a link with them however transitory. Some communion of the spirit is effected, and they have huge joy. So they are laughing.

It is not that there is much to laugh about in the world for the atrocities in the Balkans are in our mind. We have not forgotten the genocides in Burundi and Rwanda, and the breaking out of bitter tribal warfare in Zaire. We have not forgotten the innumerable wars that have happened in the past fifty years, especially

that vast war of attrition—the Cold War. We have memories of the Berlin Wall, but that has collapsed. The great powers have not really been at war for fifty years, albeit lesser powers have. As though, then, this is the moment, a thousand white balloons are liberated and, up in the high air, a thousand pure spirits are dancing.

Of course the people in the crowd are real Aussies, holding hands or helpless with pride and pain and tears and laughter. We look down at children whose backgrounds are ethnic, who are the firstfruits of our multicultural society. They, too, are laughing up at us. When they shout and joke their accents are of this land. We are all one together whatever the rich cultural secrets they retain for themselves.

Suddenly we hear shouts. Our names are called. We look out with wide eyes and there are friends, folk we know and folk who are glad to know us, and maybe proud to see we have laid aside our regular dignity to become human again in a long march of humans in their human history. So we shout and wave madly and they do the same, and others are glad we have friends, but then they are all our friends. We do not stop waving to all. We wave and we wave and smile and smile until smiles become almost fixed, but yet they are real and warm, and we grow with the interchange and the human communion.

What we are not seeing are the folk behind us. We simply have our gaze on folk, young and old, who have their eyes and, seemingly, their hearts fixed on us. Behind us, however, are thousands who are marching, and they are not spectators but participators in an event which can be considered to be major in their lives. They, too, are from every walk of life. Some are the men and women of the fighting forces, their physical powers

diminished by reason of age, but they are marching as once they marched, and as some might not beyond the year they are now in. At home, later, I will see them on a recorded video and so I will see their quiet joy, their reasonable pride, their active tribute to comrades now gone from them.

The tribute is there, also, to the society they love, with all its shortcomings. Like others, these marchers, too, have their idiosyncrasies but these are reminders of our humanity. The way we are is the way we want it, and so we tramp in swaying rhythm. Some on the sidelines try to recapture that 'first fine careless rapture' they had known in the hour of the War's cessation from its six long, weary years. So they try to dance, try to sing, try to show the original joy, but not with much success. They are really quite overcome with a different joy, the development of nationhood which has happened in the half century, the change in life, the growth of an even richer identity, all built on the foundation laid in two wars of great significance to this continent of the south. Time cannot be reversed. I appreciate the young man I was on return in 1945 but I do not want to be again that grown boy. I am glad of what fifty years has added to me as a person. I quietly revel in the gifts that have come to me and, I trust, gone from me to others, as theirs to me.

So, whilst, as others are now attempting to do, I could sing, 'Pack up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag', and 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary', even so, these songs no longer grip me in the way they did. I have sung other songs myself, those less jingoistic and more to the point of developed human living. My future has grown stronger than it was then. I have had other things to feed my hope. Beside me is a remarkable woman who has spent almost all those years with me. We have no cause for cynicism or crass celebration.

At last we are at the Parade Ground, and Laurel is assisted down, stepping on a milk crate and then on to the ground. I make my way down, myself, still insisting I have agility no matter what my age. We make our own way across to Elder Park where the long stream of marchers is spilling into the swelling ocean of people. We all wander around, looking at one another, some exchanging secret looks, knowing nods as they recognise your war medals and calculate where you were and what you did. You think medals should be worn daily for this reason, but then what would be the surprise of vagrantly finding out one another?

Gratefully we find chairs, and sit, rest weary bones, wave to old friends, chat with a few, watch innumerable pies being munched and cans of drinks being consumed. The unbeatable desire not to be stereotyped in dress or in action keeps manifesting itself. The variety is remarkable and it is all accompanied by a willingness to chat with those we have not previously met. Social, cultural and age barriers have all dissolved.

The time for the air-raid sirens has come. The machines from fifty years ago, now outdated, wail out the warning of the terror to come, but no terror comes. At the first siren all conversation dies to a murmur and then the murmur is lost and a holy silence is like an unspoken sigh. Minds flow back to the terrible days that once were, and find their way to many war cemeteries, to turfed green fields with white crosses or other kinds of bronze plaques on white stone or marble. Those who have lost the fifty years we have had in precious peace from war's mutilation sleep unconscious of their sacrifice made deliberately or in bewilderment. They are missed, the beloved ones; and I see, silent with my eyes opened, tears starting in eyes, and tears trickling down faces, and I am made aware again of the depths of

emotions human beings have for one another. Children somehow seem caught up in it all, proud to be one with oldies and wrinklies and crumblied.

The second siren wail is like a streamer across the assembly of rememberers. Yellow and green balloons are suddenly released, beating their way upwards to freedom. Siren and liberated balloon awaken a fresh sense both of the past and the present. I am seated next to Laurel, and do not know her thoughts. My own are of our return to Australia from the prison camp, and the fast beating of the heart, the choking with emotion, the barely restrained tears, and the huge joy that enveloped us as we alighted at Circular Quay in Sydney in 1945. That day, too, there had been a solid phalanx of joyous people meeting us with tears of pity and shouts of joy and a veritable snowstorm of ticker tape, old Sydney resounding to the music of the military bands and the cries of the people lining their foot-path. They had remembered us in the years when men wasted away with sickness and starvation.

I awake to the fact that this is the 15th of August 1995. I sit in silent joy, contemplating my fellow creatures. After a time we think we have had enough. We are satiated. Any more emotion may debilitate us. To this point it has kept us strong. So we make our way across King William Road, whilst the long streams of schoolchildren are still flowing. We interrupt them and find a haven in a bus shelter whilst we await the time of the buses. I meet a bishop I have long known, and his wife and a brood of young grandchildren to whom they are interpreting this event.

Laurel, for some reason or other, is overcome with giddiness. She is glad to sit down and try to calm her trembling and the tension which is giving her chest pain. She takes tablets to counter the effects of the attack. I stand, walking stick in hand, waving it, trying

to hail a taxi, but the traffic has only just begun to filter through. The few taxis I see are engaged. I worry a little.

Without thinking, my eyes light on a rather wry man who is, maybe, a tourist. He is not dressed very well, but has a camera hanging around his neck. He is from the East. I sense he is Japanese. He has looked at me for some minutes, and makes a sign of greeting. He is gazing long at my war medals. His eyes hold a kind of plea. We use sign language, he to ask permission to take a photograph of me, and I to agree to his request. We stand whilst he takes the photograph. Then he comes across to me.

As he walks across I am trying to determine his age. Perhaps he is my age. I feel a faint inner tremor as I think he may have been a guard on one of our prison camps. Perhaps he was once a harsh and cruel guard: I do not know. The tremor passes. I am calm.

We shake hands. His voice is very soft. He is trying to communicate through broken English. His eyes are more eloquent than his words. He is speaking haltingly.

‘Fifty years ago Japanese verry bad’, he says. He shakes his head regretfully. ‘Verry bad.’ He sighs. He wishes to be fluent. ‘Verry wrong.’

He looks into my eyes, and I sense sincerity. ‘Japanese bad.’ His articulation is spaced out. ‘Sorry, verry sorry.’

I know he is sorry. I am thinking of a book I have on my shelves back at home. Its title is *Nippon Verry Sorry—Men Must Die*, words spoken by a Japanese officer on the Burma Railway, but there was no sorrow in that!

A great warmth for this man grows within me. I am in wonderment that on this day I should meet this man. I have met Japanese in their thousands in their homeland, but this one all alone and so stricken with sorrow

affects me deeply. I can scarcely withhold the tears. I can scarcely remember such a moving time in all my life. Laurel is looking around from her bus shelter. She also seems quite moved.

I take both his hands and hold them with affection. I would erase his sorrow, but I think it will remain, perhaps for ever.

He whispers almost hoarsely, 'We pray for peace. We pray for peace of the whole world.'

I want us to talk on but I think he has exhausted his supply of words, though his eyes tell me the same message that he has spoken.

We both press hands, and he is gone; a lone, thin figure who has captured the picture of a white-haired, bemedalled man who was once the prisoner of his cruel regime. I share my deep emotion with Laurel, and although she looks quite faint, she too has a joy.

I return to hail a taxi but before that a bus comes and it has our number on it. Good old 191 all the way back to Kingswood. Packed as it is, we are given seats by young children. That seems good to us as we make our way home.

Early in the morning at the bus stop a man had said, 'Have a good time!' Well, his bidding has come true.

Mr Gruntle Builds a House

In case you have not read a 'Mr Gruntle' story you will need to read this short account of this special person. In the days when they used the words 'lady' and 'gentleman' you would have described Mr Gruntle as a gentleman, and his wife Sarah as a lady. No other words would have fitted them. Sadly enough Mrs Gruntle finished her time in this world just as Henry her husband was beginning to enter the stage of his life when he was totally rational for a period of time, and then things would become vague for him, and he was likely to forget why he was heading towards the local shopping centre. Once there, he might remember, but then, on the other hand, he might not. You will have heard of this state which visits people in their old age. If you have read the story 'The Day Mr Gruntle Became God', then you will know what I am talking about. Even without reading that story, you will have guessed the state of Mr Gruntle's mind.

Not that there was anything harmful in such states of mind: Henry Gruntle was never tempted to be aggressive, assertive, bellicose or any such thing. Even so, there were times within this mildness when he could be stirred to state his feelings in regard to what he thought was out of place. He was a great stickler for the traditions: he was of the Old School through and through was Henry Gruntle.

If you live in our district, you will have seen him wandering around the streets, poking his gold-topped walking-stick into this or that. Anything untoward in appearance and he is on to it. He abhors garden hedges or shrubs which intrude on to footpaths, or branches that hang out, head high, on the same. You will know these things disturb him, but mostly you will see him pottering along this road or that, this avenue, street or lane, with a vague but contented expression in his clear blue eyes, and he is apt to notice you from time to time, and even to engage you in conversation.

One of his favourite habits is to give you the history of the house outside of which you and he may be standing. Not only can he tell the style of architecture, when it was built and what kind of bricks or stone were used in it, what timbers were utilised, and the year in which it was constructed, but also go into fine detail as to the kind of windows used, where the glass was made, whether it had been ballast on some sailing ship or whether the material was the first manufactured in Adelaide, and in what year such manufacturing began.

Such interesting meetings also have their weakness. The moment you ask Henry a question which is not about the architecture or the bricks, stone or glazing, the light will die from his eyes and he will become puzzled and forget immediately what the conversation has been about. He will go silent, or mumble incoherently, or wander off as though you are not there, as though he has never been talking to you.

His really stimulating conversations, the ones which grip and hold you in thrall to his glowing blue eyes, will be those of his own early days of life. He has had adventures galore, times of being a young scallywag, of playing the fool or getting up to interminable mischief, but none of his escapades was traditional. Each was outstanding, almost unique, always with startling elements

which made you wonder how this dignified and aged person could ever even have envisaged such fun and mischief.

Often, when the old boy is building his yarn to a fascinating climax, he will pause and in his hesitation will slip a cog as they say, a cog in the mental process, and he will stare at you, his vision misted, the object of his conversation completely eluding him. He might give a little cough, or blink his eyelids once or twice and then he is off, escaping into a kind of dreamland in which he will envelop himself, and you know you are excluded. As he sets off on a fresh ramble, you will watch him depart without a word, and you will wonder at the mysteries that old mind encapsulates. Maybe you will regret the fact that those marvellous stories have never been recorded except in that fine, but now somewhat crumbling, brain.

There were times when we were all a bit stunned by what Henry Gruntle could accomplish. Say like the time he built a house, the one on the old block behind his own home. Local folk wondered what it might do to Henry's mind when the block, with its fine old trees and the 1880 house, built of bluestone and mortar with a corrugated iron roof, was to be auctioned. Mind you, it wasn't any oil painting to look at. In fact it had not known any kind of paint for years, and the Heritage people wouldn't have given it a second look—old and all that it was.

Auctioned it was, but in Henry's absence. He was not going to go along and be there when people of all sizes, colours and dress were going to have a heartless, noisy bidding for old Jack Emery's home. Jack had let the place go to rack and ruin, but then it was a glorious ruination because the backyard had grown wild. Vines of all kinds—those domestic, those wild and those once

domestic but which now had gone absolutely wild—had grown over everything. The old workshop was enclosed in them. Fruit trees were all but immolated by green creeper, and the old fowl yard was completely draped and hidden by the same creepers which, at a certain season, went wild with glorious blues or yellows or reds—an absolute riot of colour.

In that wilderness, birds had built their nests and set up a continuous chatter, a fussing over their offspring, and cries from hungry fledglings could be heard as they competed for food from their parents. On the edges of the vines, trees of red berries fought for a place in the sun, and the Adelaide parrots swooped down seasonally to have their fill. The enormous almond tree—about the biggest in the world—was visited by the screaming white cockatoos who fought over the nuts and splattered falls of them over the half-rusted galvanised iron roof, so that you could hear them like toy machine-guns popping and planking in musical full time.

All this had been sight and sound, colour and music to Mr Gruntle whose back verandah looked out on it all. In the afternoon, the northern sun would break across the wild growth and flow into the Gruntle backyard and up to where the old man was seated, warming his own planned and domesticated garden in the process. He had often sensed that the delightful drama of it all would be broken if someone were to buy the property, clear off the vines, uproot the fruit trees, and chop down the almond giant, to say nothing of a single loquat tree that produced a life of clustered golden lamps each year—fruit that was sweet to the taste, dripping with juice and a lovely lure to the parrots and the honeyeaters, to say nothing of a vagrant loquat-eating boy or two.

Henry, with some agitation, had witnessed the murder of the property. Unbelievably the almond tree was cut

down, and on the very day the yellow-crested cockatoos were making their first invasion of the season. The vines and trees, house and outhouses all finished up in one great and sorrowful heap of rubbish which the great trucks carried away after being filled from the scoops of the giant earth movers. All that remained was a cleared block without vestige of vegetation and from which all mysterious fauna had disappeared. Cold and empty silence alone remained.

Henry, of course, viewed it with dismay. In his mind, memory was doing painful convolutions about the history of the place, dating from 1880. He resolved never to accept the change. For two years he surveyed it gloomily, fighting down the indignation which gave him little but inability to digest his food properly. Moodily he watched the weeds spring up and flourish, be sprayed and then cut, and then shoot up again. He vaguely remembered someone telling him that the person who had bought the property, erasing the house, gardens and other vegetation, had sold it because, on further contemplation, it seemed not to suit him. Gradually the pain ceased, and even the memory of its verdant past failed to trouble him. Indeed at times he looked over the fence, puckering his face in trying to recall what used to be there. Only in the nights would he awake with vague unease regarding old Jack Emery. He was certain someone had told him that Jack Emery had died, but that surely couldn't be the case. Jack and he were the same age and had grown up together. He would remind himself to see Jack the next day so that the unease would dissolve. In the morning he would have forgotten about his resolve, or he would suddenly remember that Jack had died of a heart attack. Pity about old Jack! A good fellow, old Jack. They had played 'A' Grade cricket together. The only deficiency about Jack was that he had never been to the old school. Anyone who didn't go

to Mr Gruntle's 'Old School' did not quite fit the culture in which Henry had been educated. At least he couldn't recall Jack ever being at the old school. Pity, that.

All of this happened before, and up until, the day when Henry Gruntle decided to build a house. He had been an engineer by profession but had eventually left that for the business of real estate. In those days he was at the zenith of his health, and greatly supported by his wife Sarah and, for that matter, by his children who thought the world of him. No sooner did he become an estate agent than he wanted to build, and all his abilities in engineering came to the fore. Henry began to build houses, and, what is more, made sure he landscaped the grounds of every home he built. In those days he was a vital man.

That is why it had come to him on this particular day that he could no longer tolerate an empty block, devoid of vegetation other than the pestiferous and ugly weeds. By nature of his own planned garden of flowers, small shrubs and a few trees, Henry had a kind of nookery where he was hidden east, west and south from the sight of anyone. It was here, in the back right-hand corner, that he had his compost bins where he made his famous humus. His little lame joke was that every gardener should have a good sense of humus. He chuckled every time he remembered this. Sarah had only smiled once or twice.

From the nookery he could look over the fence which faced the north and peer, unseen, into Jack Emery's old place. In the winter he would catch the northern sun and enjoy it, though in summer it was a bit too strong, forcing him to retreat to the back verandah. Spring and autumn brought glorious golden days, weather in which he could pot or re-pot his beloved plants. Since wife Sarah's death, he spent much time in his nookery. It

was the place and time when the memory of old Jack and the delightful riot of his old grounds so much entertained Henry, but when reality came he would be desolated by the now empty and silent block. Even the ghosts of the past shuddered for the sterile place it was, and they quickly found other more congenial haunts.

That is until the day the bulldozers appeared and began digging the trenches for the footings of the foundations. Mr Gruntle had watched such operations many times in other places, other streets, for new housing was a hobby of the district. On this occasion a curious thought invaded his mind. He *knew*—he *really* knew—that he was the builder on this occasion and that he, himself, as in days of past, had contracted the earth-moving men and their great machines. He stood in his nookery on an iron garden chair and watched them. For a time they seemed not to notice him, as though he was of no importance, but he knew how wrong they were, for he was quite convinced he had contracted them to do the work, and he was waiting to catch their eye to show them his approval or otherwise. It was intolerable that he should be the contractor-builder and his workmen not notice him. In days of old it had never been like this.

Generally, because of the affliction of his ageing mind, he would forget these vagrant illusions, but this one remained firmly fixed, determined never to fade away. In this case, Henry Gruntle had decided he was the contractor-builder and from this stance he refused to budge. Standing on his iron garden chair, much the same as Colonel Light statuesquely stands on his hill staring protectively over Adelaide, did Mr Gruntle gaze upon the new workmen.

At the first smoko-time when the men drank strong tea from their vacuum flasks or Dairy Vale fresh milk from their cartons, they had a bit of a conversation which he could not hear.

The first driver's name was Frank, and he was talking to his friend Reg.

'Reg', he was saying, 'did you see the old codger staring at us from over the fence?'

Reg nodded. 'Lotta people watch us when we do this kind of work. Specially people from the next doors.'

Frank agreed. He drank hot tea between dribbling smoke from his cigarette. 'But this old feller's a bit queer, don't you reckon?'

'Could be', said Reg. He stared down at the red clay they had turned up. 'Guess it gives him something to do. Must be hard when you get that old.'

'You don't have much to do', Frank said. 'Not at that age.'

'Strange business, getting old', said his mate and wriggled a bit, uneasily.

'Let him look', said Frank, 'and give him a wave or too. Probably he'll like that.'

All this time the strange thought had been weaving a kind of pattern in the old man's brain, and suddenly he beckoned to the two men who had put their flasks into their packs, and flicked away the butts of their cigarettes.

'The old guy wants to talk to us', said Reg.

They went across to him. When they got to the fence, they saw that the old man was, strangely enough, a rather fine looking old boy. Strong blue eyes. A good chin too. Didn't look crazy or anything. He extended a hand over the top of the galvanised iron fence. There was great dignity in the proffering of the hand, which they could not refuse.

'Glad you made it', Mr Gruntle said. 'I was hoping you'd come today.'

'Ah', said Reg dubiously, but Frank said, 'It's great to be here. Good to get stuck into the work.'

'That was what I was hoping', said the old man. 'I hope we can get this house built quickly. Better than having an old empty block, eh?'

'Absolutely', said Frank. He had caught a bit regarding the thing the old man was on about. 'Good to get a house up quickly.'

'Yes', agreed Reg, but he had not quite cottoned on to the idea.

'I want you and the other fellows to complete it as soon as possible', said Mr Gruntle.

Frank said easily, 'We only do the levelling, dig the trenches for the footings, and that sort of thing, but we'll pass your message on to the other fellers. I'm sure they'll cooperate.'

Reg looked at Frank and then back to the blue-eyed old fellow and was still mystified.

Frank gave a light wink, but just so that the old man could not see it. 'Our friend here', he said to Reg, 'is having this house built. I guess it's natural for him to have it built as quickly as possible.'

'Ah!' said Reg, trying to grasp the idea. Then he nodded strongly. 'Of course', he said. 'It's natural to want to get a house finished as soon as possible.'

He put out his hand to Mr Gruntle. 'Didn't get your name', he said. He spoke loudly as though Mr Gruntle were hard of hearing.

'Gruntle's the name', said the old man. 'Henry Gruntle I am.'

'Henry's a good name', Frank said, 'or would you prefer us to call you Mr Gruntle?'

Mr Gruntle frowned. Already the idea of his name had faded. He looked at the two men, wondering about them, but the idea of the house was strong in his mind. 'Just let's get cracking on the building', he said firmly.

'No worries, Henry', Frank said, and Reg nodded. 'We'll be right on the knocker Mr Gruntle', he affirmed.

They went back to their work. Mr Gruntle watched them as their machines roared into life, and as they engineered their iron dinosaurs into action. He liked the weaving and swerving, the dipping and the elevating, and then the heaping up of the red basaltic clay. Later they would fill up the great trucks until they were piled high and were driven away with a thump and a roar.

Something in him throbbed like the massive engines. He realised what it was. He was back in his prime again, building houses. It gave him a distinct thrill. True, something along with it troubled him a bit but, since he didn't know what it was, he let it be. One thing he knew was that he was building a house.

New days were ahead for Henry Gruntle. Just a pity he couldn't let Sarah know he was back at the old trade. Sarah would have liked that a lot. Maybe even now, wherever she was, she would know he was active again.

When they were locking their earthmovers, Frank said to Reg, 'He's really a nice guy, the old chap'.

'A nice guy', agreed Reg. He looked at Frank. 'Probably gives him a great kick to think he's building.' Frank nodded. 'No fool, you know, but I guess a marble or two has come loose.'

'Probably', said Reg. 'Maybe he would be disappointed if he thought he wasn't building. You think it best we tell the other guys about him and you know what?'

'We'll do that', said Frank. 'They'll just have to keep passing it on to one another. You know, all the different shifts—the carpenters, brickies, the plumbers and the like. Mustn't forget the builder either. You know, Joe Provost.'

'Especially Joe', said Reg.

They picked up their packs and moved towards their utes.

When they looked back they noticed that the old boy was still there, doing his Colonel Light survey of the

block. Quite dignified he looked, quite absorbed in his useful task. They had a good feeling about him and they were hoping the old chap was having a good feeling about them. They wondered why they felt so much for him. The feeling was for old times and old men. Sort of stability about both which did not change. Maybe it was just the clear blue eyes which had caught them.

They were not really sure, but then it didn't much matter.

Surveyor of Dreams

I know I have to get this material down as quickly as I can, for it is the stuff of dreams, and dreams are so transient: a bit like fairy floss. So I will try to give you the overall impressions as they came to me. To create the feelings that came to me, I will have to slip back into sleep and the dreaming, and speak of it all as it was happening to me. In order to do this properly, I will have to use the present tense, describing as I go, what happened, in detail.

Here I am and I am driving down this highway. I have been on highways in real life in many countries but never a highway like this. To begin with, it is so wide; my bet is that never has a highway had so many lanes. The strange thing is that, as I look, I discover it has no lanes marked on it. Moreover the surface is of timber, exactly as you would have on your floor. It is made of boards, fitted together—tongue-and-groove, I suppose—and highly polished, and I would say of a maple, or maybe they are my favourite floorboard timber, tallowwood composition. There is a nature strip in the centre, but it has no nature: it is concrete. That's OK: I have seen nature strips like this. The point is that people are driving, but the traffic must somehow be regulated because there are not many cars on the road at the one time. Not like New York, London, Tokyo and Sydney where I have been. Yet I know it is Sydney.

In fact, I know it is the Pacific Highway just near my old home of sixty years ago at Wahroonga, and I am now approaching it. I am getting a bit excited. I am anticipating seeing the old home as it was, and my Mum and my Dad and my brothers and sisters. It will be good to see them. Also I will show them my brand spanking new, shiny car.

I hear a faint cough and a Voice is saying, 'Sorry about that, old fellow. No visits to the old home on this particular occasion, you know!'

I am a bit shocked and a bit disappointed, and I say, 'No home visit? Now why is that?'

The answer comes, 'You are in dream time of course, and all things are not legit in dreams'.

Now, strangely enough I know I am in dream time. I always know when I am in a dream. But I have never realised that in some ways dreams are controlled.

'Legit?' I ask. 'What is legit?'

There is a slightly embarrassed cough and the person says, 'Legitimate. I am forgetting that you do not know the whole survey system?'

'Survey system?' I ask.

'Yes', he replies. 'All dreams are controlled. Well, more or less. Fact is, you are allowed to have your fill of dreams, and even have your own way, but then there are limits.'

'So I am nearly at my old home', I am saying, 'my home where I was a boy. Isn't it legit to go back there and to the old times?'

'Perfectly legit', the Voice is saying. 'But the trouble is your whole dream is not fully legit. You have been taking medication. Your dream is really a medication dream.'

I am still driving down this super highway with its gleaming surface of maple—or tallowwood—floorboards,

and one or two cars are appearing from nowhere, but they are there. My excitement of stopping by the old home has receded. I am disappointed.

‘What’s this about medication dreams?’ I ask.

There on the dashboard a screen lights up and a guy—a middle-aged guy—is looking at me with rather kindly eyes, and yet shaking his head.

‘I am Andrew Maconnachie’, he says. He does not actually stretch out a hand, yet I feel I am shaking one—the hand of a benevolent man.

‘I am sorry about this’, he says gently. ‘I am a Dream Surveyor.’ He bows his head slightly. ‘Just one of very many’, he says. ‘We are controllers, really. We just have to work so that you do not get into bad spots. At the moment your spot is OK, but any second now it may turn bad.’

‘By the way, I used the word “moment”, but the proper term is “impression”. Impressions are pretty powerful things and you may wake from a dream with a bad impression and that will affect your day quite strongly.’

I had never realised that dreams were *controlled*. This worries me greatly, but I realise I am going to act quickly or I’ll never understand what dreams are for, how they are controlled, and why, and all that sort of thing.

Before I know it, I am in another impression. We have turned off the brilliant highway and are on a dowdy old street. No: take that back. It is not dowdy. It is beloved. I recognise it. I can give you the name—Isis Street. I used to think that was a funny name. Later I found out it was an Egyptian name. Fancy such a name in Wahroonga!

I know where we are going. We are on the way to Bridgie’s old place. His little house with his widow mum and beautiful young sister.

I keep this quiet in my mind lest I lose my present impression. I look at the man on the screen. He is smiling gently. I am scared he will alter this impression, so I ask, ‘How come medication dreams are not authentic?’

He smiles at that. It is easy. ‘Induced dreaming’, he says. ‘Like when you are in hospital. Anaesthetics and then analgesics. Just take those on their own. Mighty powerful they are, and very delusive. You almost move out of yourself. You call it “heightened awareness”, but it is drug induced. Not wholly authentic. Not according to the best rules of dreaming.’

I have been in hospital many times. I even remember some of my anaesthetic dreams. I became as a different person in them.

I also remember old men and women after their surgery and the anaesthetics. They had lost their life orientation. They were in other places; even in the daytime. One man stood in the middle of a rose garden and was talking to the roses. Chiding them, in fact, because they had moved positions. I felt sorry for that man. He was away with the fairies, as they say. A case of induced Alzheimer’s disease if you ask me.

So I nod. ‘I get it’, I tell him. Any moment we will be near Bridgie’s place. Oh, how I used to like Bridgie, and his sister for that matter, and his Mum’s hot cheese scones, even though I knew I was out of my class in Isis Street. Below my social class of course, but in these days I never care for class.

‘That’s the trouble’, the Dream Surveyor says. ‘You like Bridgie’s associations so much that you are in for a bad impression if we let it happen.’

I grow almost bitter. I plead. I want to see Bridgie, his Mum and his sister.

‘It’s no use’, he says. ‘We are governed by the rules. So much is good for us. The rest will not help.’

I think I understand him. I nod. I accept. I become affable. Anyway, any second I'll wake up.

'Any impression now, you mean', he says quietly, reading my mind and correcting me. 'Don't worry. You will wake at the right time. Dreaming can be fun, and it is quite essential for us human beings.'

'Essential?' I ask. My eyes are still along this beloved street. I remember, everyone who lived here was poor; well, not prosperous. But they were fine people, really fine. They couldn't help being in the Great Depression.

'Essential', he repeats. 'Dreams help to finish off things. Tie them off neatly. Parcel them. Thought gets wasted when it is not completed. Takes years, sometimes, to tidy up unfinished thought material.'

I understand that. I am a man with filing cabinets and storage lockers. I keep things in files. I like to have things completed. Huh! Fancy that! Dreams are ways of filing everything that has been hanging fire, uncompleted. Everything must be important. I must be at one with the Surveyor and his 'system'. I am like him and them.

He is smiling his happy smile. He is looking comfortable, benign. 'You certainly learn quickly', he is saying. 'You are quite a competent dreamer.'

Modesty gives me a warm feeling in Isis Street. Then, suddenly, we are not in Isis Street. The road has changed. The car is driving into the old bush track I once knew. I am anticipating again. I want a special impression—Christmas bells of red and yellow, Christmas bush of rich deep pink, verging on red. I look for a sturdy waratah with its glowing red blooms against the rich dark green of the leaves. I want to see a welter of creamy, soft flannel flowers. I want to see orange and black wanderer butterflies hovering over them and masses of Sydney waxbills flashing their

green and red over the grove and giving vent to their shrill, sweet whistling.

'Sorry about that', says the Surveyor. His eyes are soft and gentle. Always gentle, this Surveyor—mild and mellow you might say. Not bad for a Dream Bureaucrat. 'You have to take some of the later things. You know—the things that help you grow up and become mature.'

So we are not in the bush. We are in the jungle. We are carrying our Signal's gear in our packs. We are making it along a track that is so narrow it just gets between trees. Overhead is blue sky, but you have to peer hard to see it, because the tree growth is so dense, the foliage—up high—so thick. The tree tops bunch together.

I am with the men, the section, the fellows. We are carrying a reel of cable on a short pole slipped through it. The cable is rolling itself out as we walk. We are humming softly. We would not like to give ourselves away to the enemy. As it is, the impression tells me there are no enemy at this moment. We are enjoying being men together, enjoying our training, our army exercises. We have our thoughts separately. We are stopping from time to time and digging a hole in a mossy bank and we are opening tins of herrings, cutting slices of bread, putting the herrings on the broad, buttered slabs, lighting our blowlamps which we normally use for soldering, and in this way we are toasting bread and fish. We drink scalding sweet tea as we eat, and remember a smiling *boong* in a *kampong* who gave us a whole packet of Peking tea. I don't think he gave it to us because he was scared of us. I think he gave it because he was glad we were defending him from the enemy.

Then I think, 'Maybe he was the enemy and was disguising himself via this gift.'

'Sometimes', the Surveyor is saying into my thoughts, 'sometimes it is good to go back and relive those old times. They strengthen impressions. When you wake, strengthened impressions are helpful: quite useful, in fact.'

'Listen Mr Andrew Macconnachie', I say to him, out of sudden thought, 'who are these people who regulate our dreams?'

Now he has a sad look. He shakes his head. The screen seems a bit sad, too. I think I have made a mistake.

'No regulating', he says, 'only guiding. Guiding you to helpful things, taking it that you are aware, from experience, that some things are not so good.'

'Hey!' I say, 'I have had bad dreams. Really bad impressions! So what about those? Someone not on duty at the time? Surveyors limited or on strike? Or are there Bad Surveyors?'

He seems quite tired. 'It is a battle', he admits. 'Not all Surveyors are perfect. But we are always working on it. Sometimes things get past us. However, on the whole, things are directed properly. Don't be worried about that.'

He looks quite thoughtful. 'You will know', he says, 'that the human race has always been worried about good and evil. Right?'

'Right!' I agree. 'They are what trouble us.'

'At the moment the jungle impression is good', he says, 'but you had better not get extended. People get extended in impressions. Their lives are dominated. They don't just dream at nights. They deliberately dream during the day. They just fantasise.'

'You have me there', I am saying politely. 'What's harmful in daydreaming? I do a bit of it myself.'

He nods. He agrees. Nothing much wrong in daydreaming. He explains that, however, it can become an

obsession. We freeze memories, enlarge them, ossify them, make them to be real when they are really our own expansions of nothing very much at all.

'Take, for example, you Diggers', he is saying. 'At your reunions you go over and over the same things: time and again.'

I nod. I understand that. In fact, I do that. Others do it much more than I do. I sometimes get bored by it all.

'Well', he says, 'you miss further impressions. Reiterating is one thing, developing is another.'

I think I understand this, somewhat. The Surveyor is quite a thinker. I am not sure I can match his thinking.

We are no longer in the jungle. We are back in civvy street. I am working as a journalist. I am very young. I have just had my first article accepted by an editor. I am about to be wild with joy. I look at the Surveyor and now, suddenly, I am not in my car but the screen is still there, though how I know not. By permission of the Dream Commission I suppose. I do not know.

Again he is giving me that gentle smile. 'It's what's ahead that matters as much as what has happened', he is saying. 'Past impressions are good to relive, but they must link up with *what is now*, and with *what is coming*.'

I agree. 'Maybe if we keep revisiting the past we will get locked into that kind of thinking. Most people we knew way back there are now dead. I mean they are not living, not even back there. They must be alive, but then they will have *gone ahead*. Maybe I should *go ahead*.'

The Surveyor is positively grinning. 'You are certainly quite a bright one', he is saying warmly. 'I like these impressions we are sharing. It is good to meet an intelligent dreamer.'

I am heartened. I have always felt lonely, coming back to consciousness, bringing part of my dream with me, until it, too, vanishes like fairy floss on the tongue.

The next impression is of the present, and I am looking at my wife of so many decades and thinking how beautiful she is. Back of my mind I am aware of my family. In the front of my mind I am excited because I am about to bring something into being which I have not done previously: not, anyway, after this manner. Contemporary ideas are crowding in on me, and I feel I might be getting a migraine, so I start to withdraw.

Then I hear the Surveyor's voice. 'Trouble is some of our dreamers keep fighting their dreams.'

Having studied Sigmund Freud quite deeply, and Carl Jung, and being a bit proud of my understanding, I say, 'Dreams are wider than us. They are of the whole race. Deep down we revert to old ideas, passions and cultures. Also there is a censor who prevents much getting through from the unconscious. Hence the mystery of our dreams.'

'Careful', says the Surveyor, 'you may lose your present exciting impression'.

'It's about waking up', I say, 'and so about writing a new story. Maybe it will be about dream-impressions.'

I see my Surveyor looks a trifle tired. I ask him, 'Do you stay up all the time monitoring the dreamers?'

He shakes his head. 'No monitoring, just guiding, like I said. We want you to have the best impressions.'

I now see he is not tired, just a little sad. I am sorry for him. 'Bit of a business guiding us in these dreams, eh?'

He nods agreement. 'See if you can hold your impression while I talk to you', he says. 'I will try to give you some helpful thought.'

I am holding on to my impression. I am thinking his ideas will help me, even in these impressions. I like this friendly Surveyor. I like this world of dreams.

'Fact is', he says, 'you are part right, part wrong. About Freud and Jung, I mean. Underneath the whole

of humanity there are two things always tugging at us. One is the past and the other is the future. In between we have the present which comes from both those things.

'We have a rather bad past on the whole. I think we once dipped out of the best, thinking what we would do would make a good present. A very good future.'

He smiles sadly, 'You have to have the best past to make the good future. If the future is already made, you call it fate and you fear it. If you are thoughtful you call it destiny and you can get excited. Trouble is we think we make the past and the future, and we don't.'

'Predestination', I say as brightly as one might say it in a dream. I, too, am becoming a little weary. 'I have never expected this sort of thing to be part of a dream.'

He seems not to hear me. 'If our past is not good, then neither is our present. If we try to make our future, we will bungle it. Most people are running away from the past and the future. Have a glorious future and you will have a delectable present.'

His tongue slips a little over the word 'delectable'. I realise that now he is the tired one. He might go off into sleep himself. So I shout a bit.

'What about the glorious future?' I say. 'How is it so?'

'It just is', he says, 'and people know that. They are trying to avoid it as much as their bad past. They want to control all things.'

'Like me getting back to my old home, and wanting to meet Bridgie.'

He nods at me. 'Precisely, my friend. Best not to fight to control your impressions. Just go with the flow. Somehow it will all work out.'

'Predestination', I say firmly, and a little louder so he will hear me.

He smiles faintly but does not take me up. 'Just never retire', he says. 'Just keep going all the time.'

'You mean never be superannuated?' I ask, amazed. 'Just go on for ever?'

Again the nod. 'That's right', he says. 'The best's ahead, so let it come. Meanwhile keep up the action.'

'Like working in the day and dreaming at night.'

'Precisely', he says. 'Or maybe you can dream in the daytime and work at night.'

I do not quite know what he means, so I keep looking at the screen, at my new friend Andrew Maconnachie, but I see he is not there.

I am a bit sad at that. Then, suddenly, I am awake. I am not sure whether I am awake or this is just another impression. I can still see the superhighway with its maple or tallowood floorboards gleaming, and then Isis Street and Bridgie as a boy, and the jungle, and us laying cable for Signals, and my impression about writing a story.

Then I realise this is the story I will write.

So I write it.

And so here it is.

Quite a dream, don't you think?

Anyway quite an impression.

You're not sure? Best thing to do is to ask my Dream Surveyor, Andrew Maconnachie. Maybe even Andrew does not know yet. Not fully, anyway.

Coo! Coo!
Coo! Coo!

How many times he had come to this intolerable despair. How many times he had threshed about in agony. How much his mind seemed like a chaos that was steeped in darkness. It was not just day after day, week after week and month after month, but minute after minute, and for that matter the minute was a day and it was an eternity. He wondered how any human could hope to live with guilt: guilt stretched out like a never-to-be-reached horizon, with much pain as one travelled towards it.

He wondered how others felt their guilt. Could it be as searing, as burning, as horrific as this? He supposed it must, but then every man bears his own guilt and there is no comradeship between the guilty ones. Guilt is so privatised, so much the one person's burden. It cannot be shared.

In some of these moments he wondered whether his father was a guilty one in the same way, but he doubted it. His father's gaze never rested on him. They had no eyeball to eyeball relationship. If he had seen momentary pity in the look of his male parent, it was gone as though it never had been. For this reason he could spare no pity amidst his own guilt. He suspected his father numbed whatever guilt he might have in his perpetual use of alcohol. That had been the case long before the event, and so nothing new had arisen. It was old

treatment his father had given in order to live his life the way he wanted. Perhaps his kind of guilt turned back on itself, devouring itself, until there was just nothingness.

At times like this he would suddenly see his thinking was absurd. Why, for example, should he think about his father in this way? Was he trying to shift his own guilt, or at least get his father to share part of it? In these better moments he knew guilt was peculiar to the person who was suffering it. One had failed, and one lived in the dry remorse of it all. Remorse was kicking yourself because you had failed. If only the moment of failure could return and one could have a second chance! Because there was no return to that point, then there could only be a going on and on in the 'might-have-been' which could never have been.

Perhaps he should not have been so intelligent a person. 'Sensitive', folk said of him, and he knew this to be true. It was the kind of affliction one had, and on the upside it helped you to appreciate things, to take in impressions which could bring delight—as in music, as in colours, as in beauty. Yet the downside was frightening. Imagination would find his spirit cowering under louring skies, cloud-laden vistas, chaos that confused and brought him back under the pain of self-accusation. To be sensitive was all right, provided one was not introspective. Always thinking; never not thinking—that was the way he was.

Nothing could have been how it was now, if he had not loved his mother. He knew his father loved his wife—his son's mother—but his love had not often shown itself practically. Perhaps most fathers were like his own, under the skin. They left women to carry on the management of the household, the discipline of the children,

the building of character. What he knew most about his mother was her love of them both—her son and her husband. She loved in a quiet, undemonstrative way.

She was always there for them both. He suspected she had trusted him more than his father, not that his father was deceitful. It was just that there was an inbuilt weakness, and in the moment of crisis he would waver. Better said, he would slip away from the responsibility. Without complaint she would take it up. All the time she would work away quietly, and he could feel her influence on him. It was always for good, so that he had some hope for himself. She had ingrained integrity in him.

It were better, in a way, that she had not done that. She had used his sensitivity to make him alert to right and wrong, to good and evil, to taking the right path. Perhaps she had used his guilt quite skilfully. In his present misery he was not quite sure.

So the period of pain would come with memory etched so clearly, so unmistakably.

They had heard the news with alarm. Folk had sent for them both, though they had been in different places. When they came they could see that she was in massive pain. Her face was purple, puffed. Normally being one who took pain without complaint there was now protest in her bewilderment at what was happening. There was a struggling for breath, a holding of her chest and then a letting go as though her hands were a heavy burden. Her eyes struggled with the agonising shock of pain.

He was glad the doctor had arrived before them both. There was some comfort in him bending over his mother's form. There was no comfort, however, in the look of

the medical man. He just shook his head, first to the father and then to the son. Already they had sent for the ambulance, and the wail of its siren could be heard in the distance, but soon it was a high shriek outside the house, then it stopped abruptly and left a silence to be known.

He had held one of her hands as they had placed her on the stretcher. Outside, the neighbours were standing inert, heads half drooped, watching with sympathetic eyes, but also drinking in the tragedy. Rarely did they have an ambulance in that vicinity.

With difficulty she was able to breathe out a few words. It was her eyes which spoke so strongly, so pleadingly. 'Dad! Ray! You'll come with me?'

The ambulance men were sympathetic. Way back in those days—thirty-five years ago—they had been like that. Today they are just confident people with all the apparatus to give comfort and ease, but in those days? Well, none of it. Just a hand to give hope. Looks of helpful sympathy, but no convincing words of assurance. If such ever came there could be no real basis.

The uniformed St John's Ambulance men helped the two men to squeeze in, awkwardly crouching in corners. The siren breathed an intake of soft sound and then whirred into life. By the next corner where the vehicle turned on to the main road it was screaming. Traffic ahead moved quickly out of the way. The noisy engine roared up the highway. The lights were not so many in those days. Police on traffic duty waved the urgent vehicle through.

The wait was not so agonising. The agony was there on the stretcher as though an intolerable weight was on his mother's chest. Her eyes kept rolling, and her breath came in sobs and sudden cries. He looked directly into her eyes as he had always done, but both knew he was helpless to do anything.

Then they were at the hospital, at the Casualty Station, the first of the squat sandstone buildings. There were steps they had to manage in getting the stretcher into the building, but suddenly they were in, like an army section that has stormed its object.

Nurses were everywhere, with doctors who had been alerted. She was being hurried to a ward, and moved on to a bed, but he sensed there was little doctors could do. A stethoscope was in action. Then they were getting his mother to take medicine orally and by hypodermic needle. He had never been sure what had happened. All he knew was that she had settled somewhat. Of the nurses all but one had disappeared, and only two of the specialists now remained. They were having a subdued conversation.

They were talking to his father, telling him something that he seemed unable to comprehend. He was staring at them fearfully.

The boy's mother called out. 'What is it? What is going to happen?'

Even as she called out the doctors and nurse moved to her, trying to calm her, but he saw waves of deep purple flood into her face, rise and then recede, and he could read terror in her eyes. He knew from custom and instinct that his father could not handle the situation. His mother knew that too.

'Ray', she said, 'you won't leave me will you?'

He knew then that she feared death. He had already feared it—for her. He had an agonising, dull stabbing in the pit of his stomach. He knew life had been too difficult for her for a long time. Now the fate she had spasmodically known was fully confronting her. There was a demand for pity in her eyes. The whites showed more than ever they had. The bulwark of their lives—this wife—mother—was losing all confidence.

'Ted', she said. 'You'll stay, won't you?'

His father was mute. His mother's look turned to him. 'Ray, you'll stay, won't you?' There was an imploring look in her eyes.

He nodded. He was locked into a prison in which he and his mother were suffering together. Maybe his father was too, but he was still and mute.

They didn't stay. The doctors said they should go for a while and maybe get a meal. Later they could return. His father had barely held his mother's hand and he was through the door. He—the son—held both her hands, and she gripped them in hers. First her appeal was mute. Then she talked in gasps.

'Come back, Ray. I need you. I know I need you. Don't leave me on my own.'

Perhaps she had not had any assurance that her husband would return. He saw the fear in her eyes as he looked back at her.

His father opened cupboards and closed them, trying to find food. She had always done that. There were left-overs in the fridge and they turned these into bubble and squeak in a frying pan.

The food seemed thick and dry in his mouth. He wondered how soon they would return to Ma.

After a while his father said, 'She's in good hands. In the best of hands. They have given her medicine. Everything will be all right. Don't you worry son.'

He did worry. Scraps of the doctors' conversation had reached him. There were words he did not know, some of them being unknown, but he had known the situation was grave. No less than his mother, he had read their eyes, sensitive to their mood. He had found no comfort there.

Now all he could think of were her appealing eyes and her demand for companionship in her fear. He knew she would die.

His father would not have it that they should return.

'Leave her in their good hands', he said. 'They are good these days, with hearts. They know what to do. Your Ma's frightened I know, but she doesn't need us.'

The boy remained silent. Part of him wanted to make his way back to the hospital. The other part wanted to believe his father's words. They were both tired, both vulnerable to the emotions surging through them.

Finally his father succumbed. 'I'm going to bed, son', he said. 'We'll see her early in the morning.'

He wasn't sure whether his father had taken drink with him into the bedroom. Later he heard him snoring.

In his own room he felt lonely, awkward, trying to justify to himself his staying away from the hospital. His sleep was uneasy.

It was his father who heard the phone. The boy came to the living room and he saw his father nod dumbly into the mouthpiece, replacing it slowly on its cradle. He knew then that she had died.

His father nodded in misery. 'She's gone', he said. 'Your Ma's gone.'

He sat at the table and the tears were streaming down his face.

The boy wanted to wail, 'And we didn't go back', but he knew that would mean more pain for them both and he stood silent, his own head hanging down. He felt dry of tears because of the monstrous thing he had done in not returning. He could see her eyes appealing to him. *She had known she was going to die and she wanted him with her.* He had known that, and part of him had been terrified. He had never seen death, and the throes of her agony here at home had frightened him; yet he knew she had somehow trained him for such an hour as the one which had been hers—hers alone as it happened.

They had gotten through the next few days; the death, the funeral arrangements, the service, the friends and relatives coming and going. Soft words were spoken to him, but neither the tears nor the comfort would come. Then they had gone—the friends and the relatives—and now the two were alone. He didn't mind his Dad going down to the pub. His friends were there and he needed their help.

His own friends were too young to help, although they did their best. They came, a half a dozen of them on bikes, and wondered whether he would like to go for a ride with them. He shook his head mutely and, unable to help, they turned their cycles and rode off.

It was then the guilt had come like hot fires, one after another. Self-accusation was there. His sensitive conscience was quivering. He played the hospital room scene over and over until his nerves were taut and he wanted to scream, but he did not. He lived in the painful silence.

Then the day came—a year later—when he was renewing the tennis court. He was painting the white slaked lime mixture over the court surface. His anguish was being replayed for the millionth time, it seemed. The twelve months had passed and there had been no relief, no cessation of pain, no freezing of his guilt. Over the time he had concluded that this anguish would never leave him, and he wondered whether people went mad over such remorse, such unending contrition that brought no release.

He was standing in the room. That he would never forget. He had left the door open, and could scarcely believe that a pigeon had fluttered in. It was of warm colours—gold and brown with some white. He had not

seen a bird so beautiful, certainly not a pigeon like this one. It seemed to fly at him, and its cooing song was, 'Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!' Surprised and a trifle delighted, he answered, 'Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!' If anything, it too was delighted and it fluted incessantly, 'Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!', 'Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!', 'Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!' It fluttered to the floor, and stood on his shoes uttering its 'Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!'

Then it surprised him even more. It acted like a messenger who had been sent to tell him something, and something wonderful, something, perhaps, of love, of his being loved.

It was fluttering up against him, pressing against his whole body, climbing by flight until it was up to his knees, his waist, his chest. Then with a final flutter it had landed on his head and stood there all the time uttering its 'Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!'

How close it had been. How soft. How affectionate. How intimate. Its cooing had talked to him in his heart, and, puzzled and bewildered though he was by such actions, he was nevertheless delighted beyond measure. Not for a long time, longer even than a year, had he had so much pleasure, so much joy.

He was not a superstitious person. He was a person who dreamed much but had no fantasies. This was certainly like a fantasy but it was a happening which was talking to him. The bird above was somehow dissolving his tension, his guilt-anguish, his harsh, dry remorse, until none of it was left.

Then the bird began to flutter its way down, facing him as it had when ascending. Descending now, it was pressing its soft body and fluttering, and all the time uttering its 'Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!', 'Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!' until it had passed below his face, his shoulders, his chest, his waist and thighs and knees, and was now seated on his shoes. There it seemed to quicken its

cooing in a final burst, as it fluttered up and was suddenly gone through the doorway.

In wonderment he watched it fly away, until it was a pinpoint of movement in the clear blue sky. Even at that distance it had a body rhythm as do all pigeons, and he could see it flow finally into nothingness. His body was glowing as though some narcotic had banished the pain; but with a narcotic there are still memories that bring disquiet, but here there was no disquiet. He was no religious person, but the movement of that intimate, caressing creature had somehow taken away his guilt, and all the anguish that goes with dry remorse.

He felt free. In fact this was the first time in his life that it had happened. Somehow he knew all things were well, no matter how much he had failed. His mind no longer clutched at the past and its disaster. What was flooding him he knew to be peace, and with a joy that was as simple and gentle as the peace. He wondered for a moment whether this was what his mother had known and maybe even taught him. He did not know, and it did not matter. His memory was no longer fixed on those events of a year ago. He was liberated from them, and maybe they were liberated from him.

At that point in time he did not know all this would last for decades and even more. Indeed for ever. But then how was he to know that he would ever know the fluttering of the golden, brown and white pigeon, and the forever release from the guilt that had bound him so painfully? Of course, at that point he was not to know, but what he did know—and this was what mattered most—was that the world was not all failure and wrongdoing and guilt, but it was made of better things, like serenity, tranquillity and delight. That was the great discovery—that somehow a pigeon could open a door to a human being, a door to delight and persisting pleasure.

Comfortable Grace

I can remember, as a boy, that I was somehow always untidy. I think there was only one other of my four brothers who was ever in this state, but he was so much older that we never banded ourselves together to defend our way of life.

It seemed to me that my body was indwelled by a lively spirit which always wanted to be about doing things. I think I might have been much quieter in one part of me—a contemplative part of me—which actually was so quiet to be almost sluggish. I remember being spoken of as ‘dreamy’.

‘He’s a dreamer’, adults used to say. They used also to say other things. They voiced their ideas aloud as though I could not understand their grown-up language. I understood every word.

My father was the one. He never held back his opinions or his criticisms. Of me, I mean. His face showed his impatience and even despair. Seeing there were nine of us children he certainly was much occupied with looking after us. I think that without our mother he would have gone mad, but then he was too strong for that. He just spoke strongly, and we jumped to it.

Apparently he could never speak quite strongly enough because I persisted in being untidy and unkempt. On Sundays we were dressed tidily. Even I had a tidy look, I think. We were not supposed to get out of our good clothes. As we did not play on the Sabbath,

it was considered that we should look decent and act decently. The most we would do would be to sit on our front fence of brick and heavy piped railing, and watch the cars go by, which in the twenties was considered to be considerable entertainment.

My parents were socially conscious enough to try to keep us looking well-dressed. The suburb we lived in demanded this. Only those on the outskirts of our society were scruffy. They were poor and their position was understood, even if they were often scorned or pitied. We all went to State schools, and my first memories are of a kindergarten. Our family of eleven persons was social enough for me not to need other social contacts, but they were forced on me in the kindergarten. Also, our teachers seemed to think it their duty to pry into our lives and discover what manner of children we were, even at the age of five onwards.

Because we walked at least a mile to school, there was plenty of diversion on the way. It was understood that you tried to arrive at school looking well-dressed. Your shoes—or boots—could retain their polish if you were reasonably careful. That could be rarely said of me, since I liked to kick things on the way, such as lumps of blue metal, the rare jam tin which served as a football, and a few other things I have now forgotten. Cartons and drink cans were then unknown. Bottles were substantial and not for the kicking of, as the army phrase goes.

How, then, could my bow tie be half way around my collar, and my shirt out at the back? They just got that way, I suppose. My hair was curly and very unruly. It reflected my wild spirit, whilst my quieter portion sensed and bore the guilt that was mine. Somehow we were reset before we went into the classroom. We had to wash our faces, tidy our hair, straighten our ties and rub our footwear on the back of our socks.

There was a large old lady always dressed in black whose name was 'Ma Parr'. This Mrs Parr could not have been very old, for when I was fifty years of age she was still living, and remembered me as a boy of six years. She told my mother many interesting things about those disordered young days.

What I am working up to in this brief yarn is that I was an active boy who rarely knew what it was to be tidy in mind and action. I have told elsewhere how I loved to go barefooted, in the very early morning, to the bush which was only a couple of blocks away from our home. I put on the oldest clothes possible so that I could do no damage, and loved the walk through dew-drenched grasses and the undergrowth—the scrub—with the small and the tall trees about me. I revelled in the flocks of birds from finches to parrots and kookaburras, and in the East Coast wildflowers which grew in thick and beautiful profusion in those days—waratahs, flannel flowers, Christmas bells and blue bells, clematis and others whose names I never came to know.

Strangely enough I liked my Sunday garb—neatly fitting shirt, shorts, long socks and well-shined shoes. For the cold weather—and even in the hot!—one wore a suit coat, and always a well-tied tie. I really tried to be in Sunday splendour, but often I was caught by the sudden temptation to take a stroll into the bush, and all the finery was quickly undone. Shinning up trees after specimens of birds' eggs, catching butterflies with a net, even sussing out the marvellous and noble creek-crayfish—though not to eat—kept me delighted. One day I was caught for a couple of hours watching—for my first experience—a calf being born. I was late for the afternoon Sunday School but it was worth the rebuke that came on me for being late.

What I started off to tell was the day my father took me to town. He always bought his clothes at David Jones

which was a superior sort of store and sold only the best in clothes. He would never have dreamed of taking me there, but he would think of taking me to Gowing's which was known as 'The Store for Men and Boys'. After all those years it is still there in its Sydney situation.

For some years I had thought my father understood me to be something of a foundling. I had self-pitying dreams of not belonging to the family—not really! Somehow, though secretly, I had been adopted. Why after having had five of our nine children I should have been adopted never entered my head. Our parents were always saying we were like this one or that of the two families come together in my parents' marriage, but I was never likened to Uncles; Arthur, Jack and Bill on my mother's side or Walter, Ted and George on my Dad's. I was miserably a foundling.

I bore with this bravely, especially because my mother insisted that she saw genius in me, and had a genuine trust that one day I would be tidy.

Then the great day came. I fancy, in memory, that it was about the time of my Confirmation Service. Somewhat before it, of course. It happened to be the age when girls suddenly seemed to be quite desirable friends, although I only saw them from a distance. Close enough, of course, to see their features, their personalities and the way God had designed them. I found this viewing of them a quite pleasurable occupation. I liked it next to seasonal sports and bush adventuring.

It was to Gowing's he took me. I had to have a special bath, and wear my best clothes, including my sturdy school boots. My father, though a dentist, knew all about men's clothing, as well as clothing for adolescents. Had he not seen my four brothers through their dress crises? He had. Now, it seemed, he was about to treat me like any other of his sons.

Why did I tell this story when my 80th birthday is only days away? 'Sentiment', you say, but I say, 'No!' I don't think folk around my age are very sentimental. They are sure they have seen about everything in life, and they have finished their nostalgia for days of childhood and youth. They prefer quietness of life, having 'seen it all' many times over. No: the reason the memory came to me was that I was thinking on the theological nature of something called 'grace'. Many folk can describe grace conventionally, 'God's unmerited favour'.

I suppose I have always reacted somewhat to this quite reasonable description. Man is sinful and does not merit being forgiven, loved, transformed—and all that! So God in His goodness gives Man respite from his guilt and confusion. Whilst he certainly does this, I don't see it that way. Grace is not like a handout. During the Great Depression—as we now call it—our family used to give tramps a handout. We had pity for them. Some-times we suggested they earn it, and often they were glad to do that, so it was not a case of 'unmerited favour'. As I see it, God does not say when acting in grace towards a person, 'Look here. You don't deserve this, but I do it out of the goodness of my heart.' There is something dreadful about that. On the other hand, if He were to say, 'You need help. There is something you can't do—save yourself—so I desire to do this out of love for you', that is not patronising but the language of love, not of a welfare handout.

Man cannot redeem himself: that is a fact. God does not have to redeem human beings, but He does! It is not a question of meriting or not meriting, but of needing, and one—God—being able to help humanity.

To get back to my little story of being taken to Gowing's, let me tell you that my father did me good! He looked at suit after suit, shirt after shirt, tie upon tie

and socks upon socks, to say nothing of the braces we had to wear. Finally he had me standing before a full-length mirror, seeing a quite handsome young man, dressed fit to kill. The shirt was fitted to the worsted suit, the crease in the trousers was knife-edged in sharpness, and the shoes were as though lacquered. I was thrilled to trembling. Before that day I had never known I could be this kind of person. I was delighted.

The salesman was also delighted, not only because a drawn-out sale was now completed, but also because he had as much pride in his work as my Dad had in getting me to this place.

So was my father. He gave me a warm grin, and said to the salesman, 'Leave the clothes on him and wrap up his old ones'.

I walked out of the shop as though in a dream. I wondered what the family would think. I knew the few miles in the train would seem like a hundred before we reached home.

We reached home and it was almost time for the evening meal, which meant all the family was home. For once they didn't tease me or use the old names, 'Slow Coach! Mister Snail! Mister Tramp!' They seemed almost awed, and my father's eyes challenged them to make one criticism. My mother was delighted.

My oldest brother said to me, 'We'll have to watch our step now. You'll take all our girls away.'

I said nothing, but inwardly I swelled with pride. I could see my sisters' eyes shining. My father looked as though this was one of the greatest days of work he had done. Probably was. I had become a new person through his act of giving me a new identity; almost, you might say, a new destiny.

Now it is only an hour since I was resting in my recliner, reading about grace, and it struck me that that day

when my father had regenerated me from a tumble-around boy to a young man at ease because well-dressed, his had been a work of grace. Did I merit it, or deserve it, or earn it? No, those words were out. Could I have done it? Not likely. It was just something wonderful that happened to me.

So how does that link with grace? My answer is, 'Suddenly I became what I never thought I would or could be. I felt full, secure, properly able to face life—not only my family but all persons I met.' You might ask, 'And what of its lasting effects?' My answer would be, 'That was the day when my family culture reached me'. Forever I like to be in that commendable state. Others may smile at my old-fashioned tidiness, and the constant repeating of the way we dressed in that era, but when I see a person who is scruffy in dress and mien, who is what they call 'scungy' and who delights in ugly garments and hair that looks as though it has been neglected, I feel a pang of sorrow. I suppose I dislike planned sartorial splendour as much as planned personal neglect. From these comments you will have me summed up.

The story has not ended. I may have some years in which to live, but then I will live them in grace. Grace is not an easy fix to life, a simple way of getting through the years. Grace came to me through my dad that day, but then it stayed with me. Somehow this father of mine planned a way of life for me that was always to stay with me. Grace is not a thing God or parents do, but what they are. My new and quiet pride issued from my father's act, without doubt, but that act was my father in action. Life's circumstances, its happenings, the people we meet and the problems that come would tell us we are not what we have come to think God has made us to be. We hesitate. We tend to slur over reality and concoct another identity, a different destiny, but

grace holds us. It—I mean God—is stronger, more intentioned, and more insistent than we are. This warm, personal Being carries us along when we would dither or slide away. In all this, grace holds us fast.

I suppose now, that I know why words of grace are ‘comfortable words’. They are the Father telling us, ‘All is well with you, despite what you may be or do that—from time to time—veers away from what you are by my creating and redeeming you. So your new clothes will always fit you, and you have no need to be ashamed of the new garments you wear. They never age or become shabby. Enjoy this comfort in me.’

It is strange how a single act of grace can transform us, and then the power of that act go on for ever, holding us in the same way, and keeping us moving to the same goal.

The Chocolate Bungalow

The address of the chocolate bungalow was 1683 Pacific Highway, Wahroonga. Its house name was Allawah, which was supposed to mean ‘Rest Here’ in an Aboriginal language. When I first saw it, I was five years of age. On that first occasion it was only up to the foundations, the footings having been laid and the brick walls up to the level where they were setting the floor plates and joists.

We had travelled from Summer Hill, my Father and I. I could scarcely believe that he would take me, I alone of my four brothers and four sisters, for I had never been a favourite of this dark, taciturn man. This day the shadows had cleared from his face, and he was smiling and he gave me great attention. We boarded the steam train at Summer Hill and went all stations to Hornsby. At Hornsby we stepped from the train and went up an enormously high set of steps and then down another set of steps, my Father holding my hand so that I did not tumble. We then boarded another steam train for Wahroonga. I was afraid of steam trains, thinking their angry bellies might burst, so much they panted as though their sides were heaving with anger. When they let off steam with a shrill whistle, I was even more afraid. This day, thank goodness, we were in

a rear carriage. Of course, I can still smell the sulphurous smoke which I loved to the last grit, but to put one's head out of a window and let it flow over one was a thing to be dreamed about.

When we alighted at Wahroonga, my Father helped me up the steps. He had told me this place was more or less in the bush, but I was not prepared for the sight of tall gums which pierced the cloudless blue sky, nor did I know the other trees which were not so tall, or the shrubs which grew on our place, some of which were covered with clematis. What struck me most were the chocolate bricks. I had never seen chocolate bricks, and my Father told me they were 'the very latest'. He was very proud of his chocolate bricks.

We walked on planks which had been placed on the floor joists. We went from room to room, my Father telling me delightedly all the time about them. Which room was which, my child's mind could not comprehend, but I kept nodding, for this seemed to please him. When I pointed to some silver nails which had fallen between the floor bearers, he lowered me down so that I could pick them up.

'We'll gather every one', he said with pleasure. 'The carpenters don't think it is worthwhile gathering them. They are too busy.'

Outside we saw where they made the grey cement and the chocolate cement. The chocolate cement was to go with the bricks. In those days they didn't have cement mixers, not even ones you could turn by hand. They had planks on the soil and flat iron over them. They made a kind of pool by building up sides of sand, and they mixed the sand and cement in the centre until the walls, too, had been mixed in. Then the young men would come with their barrows and cart the cement to the brickies or the path-makers. I did not see them on that occasion, but on another rare one when my Father

brought me during one week. I have never forgotten the leather hand-mittens the hoddies used when piling up their bricks on their hods. Nor will I forget the revelry of mixing that went on as the sand and cement and colouring was turned in. I can still hear the scrape and music of their shovels, and the songs they sang as their sun-browned muscles rippled to the rhythm.

The men all revered my Father as a practical man and they happily called him 'Boss!' and they seemed to like him standing there with his blueprint, and directing things this way or that as though he were the builder, which, perhaps, he was. When he was not building, he was planning the landscape with its lawns and paths, its poultry run, its spacious vegetable gardens and its orchard. My normally tensed and silent Father was in his element. I can remember his eyes gleaming as he showed me one patch of soil.

'Goddie', he said, 'that will be your garden'.

My heart, I think, missed a beat. I felt faint. I had never dreamed a young boy could possess a garden of his own. My Father had planned that his children should have vegetable gardens and produce for the house. My oldest brother Ray took a dim view of that idea and, instead, he became chief keeper of lawns, which seemed to have more dignity.

By the time the house was built, we were ready to move from our temporary dwelling at Summer Hill. I won't recount the event of packing or of the huge vans which brought our furniture and other possessions to Allawah. My Father was pleased to let us all run through the house in its full bloom. Linos and carpets were laid. The front verandah was glassed in with leadlight windows. That was also another love of my Father—stained glass. Our windows were all leadlights. The house, to my eyes, was huge. It sat like a stolid chocolate lion on our

large block of land and it awesomely defied all comers. The front fence was also solid, a chocolate brick wall with pillars surmounted by wide cream blocks. Large chocolate piping ran between the pillars. Above the number 1683 was the bronze nameplate, Allawah.

My Father was subject to what some of us called ‘nerve-storms’. We would sense one of his moods coming on when he showed high irritability. He would grow taciturn. He would retire to the drawing room, a room otherwise scarcely used. My Mother said that the episodes had come on since his ‘breakdown’. At these times we were careful never to show any happiness or joy, for such would make him even more surly. He would shout loudly and frighten us all, and then he would refuse all food, go into a darkness of spirit and often weep for some sorrow we could never understand. We kept this dark secret to ourselves and showed a normal exterior to the world. Even he would snap out of his mood if he inadvertently met the baker running down the drive.

When he was making gardens, trowelling concrete paths, making pergolas and planting hundreds and hundreds of rose bushes and climbers, then he would not have such moods. He had retired from dentistry at an early age because of his nervous complaint and because he had accumulated a substantial amount of money: money which was to worry him during the Great Depression. That, however, was yet some way off, and so he planted fruit trees, made beautiful lawns and fully landscaped our large property.

I think my Mother was dreading what would happen when all was landscaped, when the concreting of paths was finished, and when the last pergola was completed. Fortunately Providence stepped in. One night we were having a family time—the eleven of us being in the

large dining room—when one of my sisters pulled up a window blind absently, only to be confronted by flames leaping high into the night. She shrieked in terror. The house next door was on fire. It was an old weatherboard house, and so quite inferior to ours. My Father and older brothers leapt into action, rushing down into the garden, dragging hoses, fitting them to taps and soaking that side of our house nearest to the holocaust.

There was the sound of bells and a red fire appliance, known then as ‘the fire brigade’, pulled up outside the neighbour’s house. Men in crimson uniforms and wearing brass hats proudly leapt from their machine, and, discovering the FHR (‘Fire Hydrant Ready’), attached their hose and sent a marvellous volume of water merrily into the air. Alas! The entire building was burned before the fire was quenched. The vast crowd had spilled into our front drive. My Father’s territorial instincts were well developed and he had shushed them out from our land. They watched the brilliant blaze from under the massive pittosporum tree next door. Then, sadly, it was all over and the fire-revellers retreated from their rare treat. The owners, mercifully, had been absent. The ashes were scarcely cold before we children were rummaging in them for lost treasure, our high expectation being a gold sovereign or two.

We would never have dreamed it could happen, but my Father bought the property. For my Mother it was a temporary reprieve; my Father had a new area for landscaping. My brother Francis was given an area to build a large aviary, which he did, much to my envy. At every possible moment I would have my nose pressed to the wire netting. I adored finches and canaries and budgerigars. I could never get enough of the cheeping, the whistling and the musical budgie chattering. The

younger girls had an official cubbyhouse built for them in which to play 'Mummies and Daddies'. My Father built a fish pond and fountain for fancy carp, Japanese fantailed fish with protruding eyes.

As though that were not enough, our male parent built a whole croquet court. The game was one to be played sedately, and I think my Father felt he was back in the Edwardian era in which he had grown up. The five boys thought it was a glorious opportunity to hit balls hard through the hoops and beyond the lawn into the new shrubbery below. For the rest, the court was only used by my parents, my sisters and others on those rare occasions when relatives visited us.

By this time my brother Norman, who was two years older than I, claimed the tall and broad pittosporum tree for his own, for there he could perch comfortably and indulge in his new hobby of smoking. I think he started with a pipe. My Father who had seen the spiralling smoke above the tree finally agreed to allow the new habit, which took much of the delight of it from my errant brother.

My brothers and one elder sister liked the same tree because they could hide behind the front paling fence—the one relic of the former plebeian weatherboard house—and clink pennies on a couple of bricks, so that folk passing, not being able to see them, would wonder whether they had dropped coins. In those days, coins from one farthing upwards were deemed valuable, and so folk would hunt around for a long time, never thinking of looking over the high paling fence to search out the tricksters. We had another game in which an almost invisible string was attached to a penny, and we would haul this in slowly unless a passer-by attempted to grab it, in which case we pulled it in smartly, but of course they looked over the fence. My brother Cecil had a device by which he could clink the coin on the

pavement, after which he would haul it up into the tree, much to the mystification of the coin-seeker.

In those days the Pacific Highway was what we might, today, call a two-lane highway. Actually, it was a thin strip of indifferently laid bitumen without a white central line, and on which the two streams of traffic were very thin. On Sunday afternoons my well-dressed older brothers and sister would sit on the chocolate piping of the fence and take down the registration numbers of every vehicle which passed, so slowly they passed and so few were they! The gutters were without kerbing and generally overgrown with weeds. There we could gather the bottles for which we could get money, and sometimes we found treasures of various kinds. How often we walked with our gaze fixed to the gutter!

When the Great Depression began, so did terrible stories of professional men committing suicide in our suburb, and businesses went to the wall and many were made bankrupt. That was a thing of great shame in those days. Swaggies began to appear on the Highway, many of them from good homes, some of them quite brilliant persons. My Father would help them every time, but not without them doing a little work to keep their self-respect. I discovered to my social horror one day that my Mother was selling flowers, that she was cutting roses freshly every day, growing carnations and dahlias and getting my brothers to send them off at Wahroonga Station to florists in the city of Sydney. We were so socially conscious that I dreaded my friends ever discovering this dreadful secret. My Father had gold sovereigns from his dentist days and he had withdrawn a lot of silver coinage before the banks went broke. I know he used to hide his cash under a Valencia orange tree, but since we had about ten of these trees,

and because he could not always remember which tree covered his treasure, he had some difficulty in discovering it. He would never hide it by day for fear someone might see him. Even at night he used a torch as little as possible.

I think I only had one phobia when we lived in Allawah. It was dread of the dark, and when my Mother would send me the half-mile to purchase something at the shopping centre, I would fear the darkness between street lights. Most of all I dreaded the darkness that resided heavily around our lavatory. It was not far from the house but it had decent lattice work about it, and vines grew over the lattice work. I had this idea in my mind that a burglar would be hiding behind the door. For this reason I never closed the door, fearing he would be forced to attack me. Occasionally someone could be heard on the gravel path and I would be in an agony of choice between closing the door and leaving it open. Perhaps the most disturbing of experiences was to have the nightsoil man withdraw the sanitary pan from the rear when you were seated over it. 'The nightsoil man' was polite suburbanese for 'dunny man'.

As all narrators say at some time or other of their lives, 'Time would fail me to tell', after which they proceed to tell! I, too, could tell of the great love I had for our chocolate bungalow. I could tell you of the baker, the butcher, the greengrocer, the milkman and others who delivered their goods to us, and were glad to do so. I could tell you of the bottle-ohs who called for bottles and sacks, and the clothes' props vendors who shouted out their wares. I could tell you of Biddy our small Sydney Silky, who barked frighteningly from her small body and chased these vendors to the front gate, who made sure she never arrived before they had closed it. I could tell of

my daily hours of travel from Wahroonga Station to Glenfield past Liverpool so that I could pursue agricultural training, for, yes, it was coming. My Father was about to buy a farm, and he did! He bought a beautiful property, the old Box Hill Homestead on the way to Windsor. I could tell you of my Mother's heart-brokenness for she never wished to leave the chocolate bungalow. Three of my older brothers and their peer sister had already left. The remainder of us had some dark memories of our Father's nerve-storms, but Allawah was home to us. We also made Box Hill our home, yet why is it that my dreams never revert to that place? Why is it I dream often of the old chocolate bungalow and its leadlight windows, its lawns and pond and croquet court and the aviary of birds which my brother Francis gave to me when he left home? Sometimes I beat wildly on the door to be let in.

As you may have guessed, my story has to have a poignant ending and such it does have. My aging parents sold their beautiful farm and returned to Wahroonga, though some distance from our old home. Perhaps they had various feelings about the house in which they had lived longest, but they never told me.

I have always been the sentimental one in our family so I have a thousand memories attached to that old house, which always seemed to me to be a new house. Because of that, whenever in later years, by chance I drove past it, I would keep my eyes averted, not wishing to see it as the property of another family. So I went through a war without going near it, but my homecoming dreams so mounted up that, on one occasion, I could not spend one more day on a visit to Sydney without seeing it. My friend Derek who had grown up with me around that place warned me against revisiting it.

‘Not only is this always a foolish exercise’, he said, ‘but can also be one which will damage your old memories, and these have grown precious to you’.

‘They have grown precious’, I admitted, ‘but I will risk them for the nostalgia I feel. I must somehow deal with that.’

‘There is another reason, too’, he said, ‘but I will not tell it to you now. Come, we will go to your past and indulge you for a little.’

It had been many years since I had been on that part of the Pacific Highway. I was almost aghast at the six lanes, the volume of traffic and the speed at which it sped. ‘Raced’ is a better word than ‘sped’. I realised that it would be impossible, ever, to cross this highway which once was lazy and indulgent. One could only now do so at a pedestrian crossing. I was also astonished at the loss of old landmarks. Then, suddenly, we were there.

We had gone somewhat north of the chocolate bungalow, and had turned to come back on the right side of the road. It seemed like an interminable wait to be able to accomplish this.

Derek nudged me out of the car. ‘Find your Allawah, your 1683’, he said.

I walked back towards the old water reservoirs, stopping short at a chocolate bungalow, but it was not our old home. It was light brown, and not the dark chocolate I had known. I looked at it closely, and exclaimed, ‘That is the Reynolds’s old home’.

Derek nodded. ‘And Allawah?’ he asked. ‘It must be the next place, eh?’

The next place was not Allawah. It was not a chocolate building. It was built of red brick, and it was high, three stories in height. I walked to its drive and it was not even the drive I had known. There was a drive but a foreign one. I looked at the high-rise set of flats, and saw

they went deep into our old place, but the lawns and the hundreds of rose bushes were gone, and also the trees and the pergolas. I looked at the other side of the drive and there was another set of high-rise apartments, of the same red brick and not at all beautiful in my eyes. Gone was the marvellous old pittosporum, seat of my brother Norman’s smoking habit. The croquet court had also gone, and of course the fish pond and aviary.

I looked at Derek. He nodded in silence. Then he spoke. ‘I told you that you would be shocked’, he said.

‘So I am’, I said. ‘And yet I am not. The old memories, none can take them away. They are mine for ever, and even more mine than ever. I don’t know whether I will come again and again in my dreams and knock wildly on the back door for admittance, but they are mine—those memories.’

I looked around. ‘I think I can remember every day, and the environment of those days and the things that happened, and the people I knew and loved. Only a few did I not love, but even they are fine enough, now, in my memory.’

I grinned at my old friend, and made my way to the car. ‘I won’t even look around’, I said, ‘or I will begin to tell all those stories over again, and then you will tell your stories and the past will return to this highway where every lane is a fast one, and shouts to us of our “today”. Let’s be going, Derek.’

He smiled gently and started the engine. We watched our moment and slid into the traffic.

‘They were great days’, I said, nodding strongly.

He agreed. ‘Great days, all right’, he exclaimed, and I could see he was busy with the memories which were crowding in on him. Memories were crowding in on me, too, but I think the warmest and strongest was my standing on the exposed floor joists and looking down at the silver gleam of the fallen, stray nails. I could feel my

Father's hand in mine, and so rare an occasion was that I had, now, to hold back a tear, because other loves have found their way through that opened door, and so many loves there have been. So many.

Pictures of the Past

My wife Laurel is a helper in our local Nursing Home and Hostel institution for seniors. 'Institution' is perhaps not the best word, for it is not just institutional. It and its sister Nursing Homes are warm, caring organisations which have the comfort of their clients very much in view. There is nothing impersonal about them. Laurel helps to give out morning teas each Friday and on the few occasions when her volunteer partner-helper has not been able to be present, I have assisted her. It is quite an experience to go from room to room to give the tea, coffee or Milo, and one meets many interesting people. Of course, some of them are quite aged, fragile, and a few are only partly conscious of the world around them.

On the mornings I helped my wife, I would see a group of men gathering together in a large common room, at a long table with rounded ends. I wondered at their coming together, and when I asked why I was told, 'Oh, just for a chat and a bit of friendship'.

This intrigued me and I asked whether I could join them. Not being a member of the Nursing Home and Hostel it seemed a bit cheeky, but I was eventually invited to sit and share with them. This has turned out to be a very special thing, one of the deepest pleasures I have known. In this story I would like to tell you bits and pieces which have so delighted me. I know the men are pretty generous, and I am sure they won't mind me

writing a little about the time we have together. I have not used their given names or surnames so that they can remain unidentified to those outside.

First of all let me debunk some ideas which people often have about what they call 'old people'. I am over eighty years of age, and that will seem old to many readers. I happen to have excellent health and continue to do the kind of work I have been doing for many years. It is true that some whom we know as 'old' do lapse into dementia, but this is not on a high percentage basis. I have spoken to senior folk for many years, here and there, and on the whole they respond the moment you say something which relates to them. Their heads may be resting on their chests, but just say that related word and they come to life. Up comes the head and they are listening. What is more, they will ask and answer questions. Sociality doesn't necessarily diminish with increased age. Naturally enough, many of them are quite intelligent. The years have brought wisdom to most, and their views are worth attention.

In our group of about ten men, one is one hundred and one years of age. We will call him Harry, but during the 1914–18 War he was known as Barney. A short time ago he received the Legion of Honour from the French Government. His mind is very clear, his conversation lucid and his sense of humour quite crisp. His memory certainly goes back to World War I. I think Hector is about ninety-seven, and then there are three more who are ninety-one. One is Jem who has written a fascinating novel about a piece of South Australian soil—a farm which has passed through many incredible stages in its history. Jem has a crystal clear memory of all Adelaide's history. He should have been an historian. Like Jim he has a fund of anecdotes. Then there is

Arthur who has his Doctor of Science which is quite a rare degree. Arthur worked in the CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation), for many years. There is Andy who had polio as a boy in the days when there was very little treatment for it. Ian is a quiet and gentle person with a good sense of fun. Patrick, the engineer who went through Adelaide University with Jem—the author—engineer—rarely talks, but he seems to hear all that is said, and sometimes his eyes gleam with interest. Very occasionally he will utter a word. Jim is perhaps the most vocal of all and has fascinating and humorous stories to tell. His friend Jerry is a born storyteller. He was born on Kangaroo Island, and then came to the mainland at the age of four. I doubt whether he has forgotten anything that has happened in his life. There are one or two others who come when it is possible. Few would miss their Friday talk.

It is interesting how the men come to the 11 a.m. meeting. In fact they are there earlier than that, not wanting to miss conversation. A few come in wheelchairs and others use walking frames. One or two have a walking stick, and a few come walking with straight backs, upright and alert. Very helpful is Andy's daughter, Jocelyn, who has the urn bubbling away, making coffee or tea for us when we arrive. She always brings the treat of sliced cake. The men really love her, and whereas she used to retreat once the conversation began, she has been glad to stay since we asked her. Older men are not worried when a bright, younger women will sit and listen quietly. She has the added virtue of being a trained sister, although she does not work in the Home. It is a treat to see them coming, settling in, filling up the long table with its rounded ends. They anticipate a welcome change from all their other

activities and—for some—their inactivities. Watching TV can have its good points, but a change from it is welcome. At heart we are social creatures, I suppose.

Some of us are a bit deaf. Hector used to complain that marvellous conversation was going on and he was missing out on what he called 'lovely subjects'. Deafness emphasises loneliness, as we all know. To see others interested, gripped, smiling and laughing without knowing what is going on is a difficult matter. Just about everything you can think of is discussed at one time or another, and who wants to miss out on this kind of talk? Hector certainly doesn't.

It struck me one day that if we were to get an amplifier and a microphone from somewhere, then we could all hear each other, and all share in the 'lovely subjects'. I asked some of my friends who are electronic experts and they said you couldn't have one on the long table around which we sit. They talked about 'feedback' and that sort of thing. They said the microphone would squeal in protest. No: it couldn't be done. I was somewhat depressed to see my bright idea considerably dimmed.

Well, it was done! The folk I work with discovered an amplifier and a radio microphone which had been stored away with other redundant electronic gadgets. John, my capable friend, came on the first occasion to help us use it, and—wonderful happening!—it worked! Of course some of us didn't want to speak into a microphone: it was a new, strange experience. We had a few squeals from the amplifier, but then everything settled down and so we began—one by one—to talk into the mike, make our comments, and then pass it on—hastily at first and later, reluctantly—and the conversation seemed to blaze into life. Everyone was delighted and Hector especially.

We asked Arthur to tell us a bit about himself. This very tall man has never gotten over the wonderful miracle which has been his life. He was the son of a blacksmith in Tasmania and, from such humble beginnings, worked at the education offered to him, or earned by him, achieving an outstanding position in CSIRO and the Waite Institute in South Australia. Many are the stories he tells us, especially of the importance of studies of soils for the good of agriculture, or the part he played in atomic research in the team that helped Sir Mark Oliphant. 'What we did in that atomic research', said Arthur, 'was just chickenfeed beside what that giant accomplished'. What Arthur did in research of soils is another matter. He has helped Australian horticulture immensely.

Hector is a gentle person who spent forty years working in the old Theatre Royal. It was fascinating to hear of those years with this now non-existent theatre. Chocolate boy he was, usher and ticket seller, and all that goes with such a life. We learned as much from him as from Arthur, though in a different situation, but the camaraderie between all sorts and conditions of men is a wonderful thing to observe and share.

Andy has a stock of jokes that come out slowly from him since he has been a bit affected by a serious illness. Nevertheless his eyes twinkle and the end is worth the waiting.

I can't cover all the wonderful stories I hear week by week. Not having lived in Adelaide all those early years I find it fascinating to have the past rebuilt before my eyes. It is like being transported back to the time when Adelaide was a growing and sturdy country town. Jem and Jim and Ian help to colour in this picture. Andy has stories both of the country and the city. I suppose any other ten men would be as variant as they are, each

having histories and things to tell, but in this yarn I am trying to get to recounting an hilarious tale which Jim has told us.

Before that I will tell you the story Jem told to us of Patrick, our rather silent engineer. Patrick has worked in high places in engineering both in Sydney and Adelaide. By inclination and gift he has been an imaginative inventor. Long before solar energy took on, Patrick had invented a backyard solar oven. He did this out of the shiny inside tin of kerosene cans. Putting these pieces together he tried out his oven in the blazing Adelaide summer sun.

The story is classic. It worked! The solar-energised oven, I mean. Not only did it work, but Patrick, a bachelor, had a special recipe for making fragrant biscuits. One day when he was trying out his oven it happened to be the very time a house auction was in process next door.

The auctioneer was standing with his podium and his wooden mallet. He began asking what was he offered. He noticed the inattention of his hitherto enthusiastic audience. To his great sorrow—and perhaps horror—he saw his bidders melting away. They were making towards the fence on his right and peering over it. Heads were certainly lowering over the fence. Puzzled and peeved he followed the crowd. He kept asking them pitifully to come back and give him their attention. A greater power was at work than his.

As he came to the fence he smelled the pervasive fragrance of baking biscuits. For some minutes he lost interest in his auctioneering. He, too, peered over the fence. The newly invented shining wonder of an oven met his eyes. The man tending it looked quite intelligent. A few folk showed their longing for what was cooking in the solar heat. Here, I am not quite sure of my grounds for proceeding with the story. Did Patrick generously

share his biscuits? Did those potential homebuyers feel the crumbling cookies melt on their tongues? Or did they just have to be content with the smell, even though maddened by it?

The auctioneer pulled out some notes from his pocket. He offered a pound or two to Patrick the inventor.

‘Please’, he pleaded, ‘will you go away? Would you come back some other time to do the baking of your marvellous biscuits.’

Patrick was nothing, if not a man of dignity. He wanted no payment. He gathered up his trays of biscuits, nodded to all present and made his way back to the house. Intrigued, disappointed but marvelling, the reluctant gathering turned itself back to the auction, and the auctioneer.

‘What am I offered?’ called out the auctioneer, but now he was only going through the motions. Patrick’s solar-heat stove was still before his eyes, and the fragrance of the biscuits lingered in his nostrils, and, indeed, the nostrils of all present.

Harry’s short stories are always very short. He told us one in a few sentences. He said, ‘At the front you have to be careful. I tripped over a signal wire, and went flat on my face in the mud. The fellows all cried out, “Harry’s had it. He’s got his!” They thought I was dead. I stood up and they shouted. “Look at Harry. The blighter’s been resurrected!”

Now we come to one of Jim’s many stories. This one is about Dutchy. Jim was a jockey for many years, years that are themselves filled with stories. At one stage he was a bartender.

‘Dutchy used to come in to the bar’, he said. ‘Everybody knew Dutchy. You would see him all around

Adelaide, especially in the parks where he would sleep. He always had two dogs with him. You always knew it was Dutchy by the two dogs. He was a rough customer, but everyone liked him. He was pretty quick with the screwdriver. He would open a car quick as you could think. He would go around the pubs asking folk what they wanted, maybe a car radio or something like that.

‘One day he had used his screwdriver on a car and the police were after him. He asked me to hide the screwdriver, and what could I do? I hid it. The police were baffled.

‘Actually Dutchy and the police were good friends. They saw so much of him. He was always in and out of gaol. In fact he liked gaol. He liked it so much that one cold winter he went up to the Adelaide Gaol front door and knocked on it. No one came so he knocked pretty hard. Then the manager of the jail came.

“What do you want, Dutchy?” he asked.

“I want to come in”, said Dutchy. “Pretty cold out here.”

“You can’t come in”, the manager said. “The only way you get in here is to commit a crime.”

“Oh”, said Dutchy. He went off, feeling cold and sad.

‘Pretty soon after he saw a police car. There were a number of policemen around it.

‘Dutchy had plenty of bad language. He was also eloquent in describing what kind of people policemen are. This group of law-keepers seemed to be quite sensitive to Dutchy’s slander and language. So angry were they that they put him in the wagon. That night Dutchy had a good meal and a bed. Next day the magistrate sentenced Dutchy to two months in Adelaide Gaol. Dutchy sighed with relief. He was home again!’

Jim told us that the Warden lived in a house outside the gaol. He knew that Dutchy more or less loved the gaol,

and that he would never escape, even if the opportunity came to him. The Warden kept chooks. He would get Dutchy to do things in his house or garden. One day he came to Dutchy with a pail of kalsomine. A more or less white kalsomine it was. He took Dutchy to the poultry run.

‘I want you to do some kalsomining’, he said, pointing to the fowlshed.

Dutchy looked into the shed. There were fowls in it, also some in the yard.

‘I can do that, boss’, he said. ‘No worries, just leave it to me.’

The Warden felt no need to worry, even though the poultry run was outside the gaol. ‘Go to it, Dutchy’, he said.

He was away most of the day. When he came back he looked into the poultry run. No Dutchy! He looked into the poultry shed. No Dutchy there, either.

He didn’t feel too upset. He trusted Dutchy, so he went looking for him. Well, you know where the Adelaide Gaol is, and where the Warden’s house was.

The Warden was puzzled and he walked up the road, towards North Terrace. Then he was in North Terrace. He looks up, and there is Dutchy and he has the Warden’s big Rhode Island Red rooster. It is tucked under Dutchy’s arm.

He stared at Dutchy. ‘What’s happening, Dutchy?’ he asked him.

‘Nothing much’, said Dutchy. ‘I did the kalsomining and when I opened the gate for a minute or two this rooster gets out, and I am chasing him up the road, right here into North Terrace. I’m taking him back for the kalsomining.’

‘Are you now’, said the Warden. ‘Didn’t I ask you to kalsomine the chook-shed? I get to the shed just now and what do I see? You haven’t kalsomined the shed at

all. You've kalsomined the chooks! My best laying hens, the pullets, and the other rooster—you've kalsomined the lot!

'Cripes, Boss', says the amazed but trustworthy prisoner. 'Fancy a man doing that! You showed me the shed and the chooks and you said, "I want you to do some kalsomining". Gee, Boss, here am I kalsomining all the chooks, and that is not what you want at all.'

'That's the kind of man Dutchy was', said Jim.

The story goes on, Friday to Friday. I have come to appreciate these men who are older than I. I find a gentle sort of humility in them, the humility which comes from having battled in life, and the end in this world is never far away. Some are married, some widowers, some single. To close off this variegated narrative I would like to tell a short yarn concerning Andy, Jocelyn's dad.

One day, in a surprising way, he called us to attention. He had something to say, and it was certainly unusual.

'I've needed to say this for a long time', he said. 'The things you fellows have talked about have been good. Wonderful in fact, and I want to thank you for them all. I'm just grateful.'

I think the men didn't quite expect that to come from Andy. They could see he was quite exhilarated. There was also a light in his eyes. At that point it was time for us all to leave. Lunch is at twelve, and they had to make their way to the dining room.

Jocelyn, Andy's daughter, said to me quietly, 'Dad wants to say something to you'.

When I went to Andy in his wheelchair he said clearly, 'I have woken up to myself. I've never shown any appreciation for what has been done in all the

years I have been in this Home. I've not only taken all the nursing for granted, but I've grumbled and been cantankerous, pitying myself. The Nursing Home has employed those who are here to help me and I've never been grateful.'

He paused and looked at me. 'Jocelyn said it is not just the Nursing Home folk who employed these caring helpers, it is the good Lord who is the one who employs them.'

He stared into my eyes. 'I was so miserable. I thought being in a nursing home was the dead end. I kept telling myself, I have come to the dead end.' His eyes lit up, and he smiled with pleasure.

'There's no dead end to life', he said. 'I've just discovered that. Wherever I am is no dead end. Nothing can stop it being good life. There's so much to be thankful for.'

When he said that I had a sudden flashback to the Changi Japanese Prisoner of War Camp where, one day, I felt a sudden flush of rich freedom, surpassing any freedom I had ever known. It was a sensation which came down on me from above. I looked out at the silver water of the Johore Straits, and was overwhelmed. I thought in my mind: I am more free in a prison camp than ever I was in my life. So I understood Andy. Maybe it is trite to quote the old couplet, but I'll risk doing so:

*Two men looked through prison bars,
One saw mud and the other saw stars.*

It was time to go for the meal. Jocelyn wheeled him towards the dining hall. As she passed she looked at me and her eyes were glowing. I thought about those who think a Nursing Home and Hostel are 'the dead end' and I knew how wrong they are.

* * * * *

I guess that in the Hostel part of the Nursing Home senior folk still have their battles, are still working out their lives. In the Nursing Hospital rooms the same thing is going on. I sometimes think of the deep loneliness human beings have, even though they are children, young, middle-aged or—as we call it—old. Sharing love and affection, owning up to our human fragility, and knowing that humanity is not alone in this world is a good experience. Love from above and love from around us is what melts loneliness and gives encouragement to us all. In a rough way that is how it was in the Services during the War. In a gentler way that is how it is in truly caring Nursing Homes and Hostels. It takes a lot of patient love by the caring ones to achieve serenity for the aged, but then the carers are not the losers. They have their own reward.

Pirgah

Today we are going again to the juniper forest. That's what Dad calls it. To me it is so large that it never ends. Also I think it is about on the top of the world. We try to come here, to the forest, every year if possible, to spend our holidays. We catch the train from Hyderabad in the hot Sindh province and travel over one thousand miles to reach Quetta. Did I say that the Sindh region of Pakistan is hot? Boy, is it hot! You can surely call it that. It's a long way from that place up to this place where we have our holiday. Ziarat they call this place. You have to get the bus from Quetta to this village which is about 10,000 feet above sea level. That's what Dad says. Mum says the word 'Ziarat' means a shrine. A shrine is the place of a holy man of the Muslim religion, the place where he was buried. I had to do a project for our Blackfriars Correspondence School, and that's how I got to know about it all. I find the place very interesting, but it is also a bit scary.

Mum and Dad are always ones for adventure. They want to see special things. So they wanted to go to the shrine. 'Pirgah' is the Pakistani name for shrine, and Dad speaks good Urdu and asks people just where is this pirgah. They look at him a bit and just wave their hands in the air and sometimes they point in one direction or another. I often wonder if they know where it is, or maybe don't want us to go to where it is.

Mum says that the Muslims believe that if you go to a pirgah and say prayers and bring gifts for the dead saint, then you will get merit. I don't rightly know what merit is, but Muslims like to get merit. It goes towards their ultimate salvation if it is done properly. That is why many of them give money to beggars and all that kind of thing. We have seen other pirgahs and they are places where you see the graves of the holy men, and they are generally each in a grove of trees. In a grove there will be a hut for the keeper of the shrine to live in. Usually the keeper lives there on his own, and looks after the shrine. He is a disciple of the holy man and is given money and food and sometimes clothing by pilgrims to help him look after the saint's shrine. The grave generally has shiny streamers and strips of cloth over it to show it is special. The Pakistanis know how to decorate with many colours. *Sijavit* they call it. It also has flags flying around it, and I think that the more the flags, the greater the saint, but I am not really sure.

Sometimes the man at the shrine is married and his family lives with him close by the shrine, and all members seem to be very well off. They never starve. Once a year there is an event which happens called a *mela*. A *mela* is a kind of fair. That is a special time when people make what is called a pilgrimage to the pirgah. They come and camp and have this celebration or festival. They have plenty of fun and rejoicing. There are what Dad calls 'sideshowes'. It is all a bit like a circus, having some animals, some acrobats and players of musical instruments, and special professional singers. There are food stalls, drink stalls and that kind of thing. The singing, the music and the noise often go on all night. There are gas lamps which keep the place bright. Generally by morning the people are tired and they sleep. In Pakistan just about everyone sleeps after the midday meal.

Dad said on the day we were going to the pirgah that probably the saint's shrine called 'Ziarat' might not even have a disciple, it being so far out in the forest, but Farook our *chowkidar*—the man who looks after the house and does special jobs for us—shook his head and said, 'No Sahib. That is not so. Many people go to this ziarat. The words "ziarat" and "pirgah" mean the same thing. This village where we are living now is called Ziarat even though the pirgah is miles away from it. We are proud of the name of our village because it is named for one of the most famous ziarats in all Pakistan and India.'

Dad was very polite about that and nodded his head. You must never offend a Pakistani. He is very sensitive about his faith, and you must honour it. It was just that we had never seen people trekking to this shrine. Perhaps there was a special pilgrims' trail of which we knew nothing. All we knew was that the pirgah was higher up in the juniper forest. I also want to tell you about the juniper forest as we go on in my story. I shall never forget these trips we have every year to this famous juniper forest.

I suppose I ought to tell you, first, that my Dad and Mum are missionaries. They brought our whole family from Australia to Pakistan and there are six of us. Three of us have had to return to Australia to do our high school education. These are our brother, who is the eldest, and then there are my two older sisters. We miss them a lot, but it is fun coming to the Hills of the North-West Frontier every year. We stay in a house which is owned by the medical missionary people called the Hollands. Their name is very famous in Quetta where they are doctors. They run the Mission Hospital and they take cataracts out of the eyes of people who are blind, besides helping other sick and injured people. The

blind people go there in their hundreds. The Hollands let us have a holiday in their house every year. In fact the house was built just for holidays for missionaries, and it is really like an English cottage; but I won't go into all that. It is just wonderful to come up into these high mountains and get out of the terrible heat of Hyderabad, and the hot wind that is always blowing in from the desert.

Dad and Mum have good American friends in Hyderabad and Karachi and sometimes they give us tinned food. Can you believe it? Tinned food is too dear to buy in the Pakistani shops. Our friends give us tinned meat, tinned fish, tinned cheese, tinned cream, tinned milk, tinned fruit, bottles of jams and other special foods which Mum calls luxuries. We save up all these gifts, put them in a tin trunk and when we get on the train we watch that trunk very carefully. It is always so heavy that it takes two coolies to lift it up and carry it. My! We have the most wonderful foods and Mum knows how to turn the canned food into lovely meals. We even have a fire because the mountain air is so sharp and cold. We lie before the wood fire on rugs and read to our hearts' content. At night, and even sometimes in the day, Dad tells us stories. We like these stories. Even when we go into the juniper forest we will sit on rocks and listen to his stories. Mum always has surprises for us in the picnic baskets we carry. I guess, when we are old, we will always remember Ziarat and the fabulous juniper forest.

One of the best things about Ziarat is the hot bread they make, called 'Nan'. Most people know what jappatis are. They are flat breads made out of unleavened flour, baked on a hot-iron or in a tandoori oven. Nan is made out of leavened flour and it rises and is very chewy, as Dad says. It is baked in a tandoori oven, a special oven built of baked mud, and the fresh nan is

slapped up against the hot inside wall of the oven, and then suddenly turned over and done again, and you never forget the smell or taste of nan. I call it 'heavenly'.

The men who live in Ziarat are very tall, strong men and are known as Pathans. They can be very fierce when fighting, and they used to love battling with the British, especially in the Khyber Pass leading into Afghanistan. At home, among their families, they are very gentle, and are very good people. They love children, and they love us very much, always laughing and talking with us. Farook, who is the caretaker of our cottage, is a Pathan and he guards us well from strangers who come to the village.

Now I think it is time for me to tell you about our picnics each day in the juniper forest. Every day Dad would spend the morning writing his books. About eleven o'clock he would come away from his typewriter, feeling very frisky in the fresh mountain air, and laughing as though he had a joke all to himself. He would come into the living room and tell us to get ready for our picnic. Mum would already have packed the picnic basket, and off we would go to the juniper forest. Farook always looked as though he wanted to come, but then he had to guard the house, so he would just wave us 'Good-bye', shouting his farewell in Pushto, his Pathan language.

I might tell you a little about Farook. He had been the servant to the Holland family for many, many years. Every afternoon when it grows late, just before our evening meal, he heats the water for us to have our baths. We shower every day in Hyderabad, and often a few times in the one day because it is always hot, as in an oven. At 10,000 feet in Ziarat we felt it was too cold

to bathe daily. We reckoned that the old English idea of one or two baths a week was enough for us. Finally Dad plucked up enough courage to tell Farook we would only have baths on alternate days.

Farook was horrified. He shook his head as though he could not understand.

‘Padre Sahib’, he told my father, ‘Doctor Holland Sahib and his family always have a bath every day’.

My Dad nodded. ‘We are Australians’, he said, as though different nationalities did different things.

Farook still looked at my Dad with horror. He had never known, in all his years, for the Engraiz—the British folk—to miss a daily bath. His look was adamant. What he had been taught he must now put into action.

He came at us with what was final. ‘I have to prepare baths every day’, he said with firm lips.

My Dad grinned. ‘Farook’, he said, ‘how many baths do you have in a year?’

Farook went as close to blushing as I had ever seen him. I think the word is ‘coy’. He was coy. That was what Dad said when he told others the story. Farook was shamed into letting us have baths on alternate days. My Dad is always telling the story of Farook and the baths.

Farook only takes baths when there is a special religious festival. At least that is what we think. Hillmen generally go to bed in their clothes and get up in them. That is what it seems like to us. Farook, forced to do so by my father, only prepares baths every other day, but I think he doesn’t respect us as much as the Hollands, after this decision to bathe on alternate days.

Our Dad told us that when Abraham was a boy the present juniper forest was probably beginning to grow. At least 5,000 years ago there was a juniper forest and

the present trees were beginning to grow, then. Not that they are high even now, but they are wide, almost like a large clump of trees, all in one. The trunks fan out from the one base and then grow up. Very sturdy they are although the ground is very dry. They grow nuts like you see on some fir trees back home.

Dad makes us pick the nuts and scratch them with our finger nails. ‘Now smell them’, he says.

When you have smelled a juniper nut you will not forget the smell. You will always be wanting to have another smell.

‘Do you know what they make out of these nuts?’ Dad asked us when we first smelled the nuts.

When we shook our heads he said. ‘Gin. That’s what they make. Gin.’

We had never heard of gin. He told us gin was a strong alcoholic drink. ‘The poor people drank gin in the terrible days of the eighteenth century’, he said. ‘People were so poor and miserable that they wanted to forget their misery and so they drank gin. When they were drunk they could forget their misery.’

He also told us of the early days of the British coming to Australia to take it over. His stories were sad ones, especially about gin being the wages some people were given.

I said, ‘Dad, please don’t tell us any more stories like that or I shall hate these juniper trees’.

Dad smiled at that and said, ‘Don’t be angry with the juniper trees. They didn’t grow nuts to make strong drink. Blame people.’

Then he told us one of his funny stories and we went skipping through the juniper trees. We still have photographs of us climbing those trees, or lying along their strong branches, or even playing at the game ‘Families’ by pretending a tree had rooms like a house.

* * * * *

One of the things about the juniper forest is that there are very large smooth rocks, and we can sit on these. We always go for the best rocks, having competitions to get the best. You won't believe what I am going to tell you now. One of my younger sisters, Ruth, was sitting on a rock, one day, when it got up and walked away!

There! I knew you would be surprised. So was Ruth who yelled with shock and then began to cry. Dad came running, and Mum with him, and they laughed until the tears ran down their cheeks.

'A tortoise!' they shouted, and sure, it was a tortoise. Dad said it could be a hundred years old or more, so big and heavy it was. After that we used to look at our smooth rocks before we sat on them.

Now we come to the very story I have been waiting to tell. It is about the time we went to find the saint's grave, the very ziarat or pirgah after which our mountain village was named. Mum had suggested to Dad that we do that, and Dad said it would be good to find it. Then we could really believe it existed.

We never said a word to Farook because he did not seem to approve of us going to that place. He had told us we would never find it. I think we wanted to show we could. It was all so mysterious that we were keen to discover it for ourselves. In fact there were signs for tourists which pointed the way for us through the forest tracks, and we followed them.

We nearly always sang songs when we walked on our picnics. The day was very beautiful as it always is in those hills when it is summer, and as I said before, the air was always fresh and cool. You would hardly ever see a cloud in the sky which was a soft, clear blue.

We stopped once we had travelled beyond the juniper forest. There were still some juniper trees, but other kinds of trees were beginning to appear, some of them

with beautiful leaves and flowers, but they were generally not tall. We began to see the hills about us. We stopped to have our picnic of wonderful food prepared by our Mum. I think we are a crazy family, for we always joke and tease one another. Mum never teases us, but just looks at us with a smile. Dad is a born tease, so Mum says.

After lunch we wandered along but there were no longer any signs.

Mum said to Dad, 'I hope we haven't lost ourselves'.

Dad smiled at her and said, 'Not this far. At least I know the way we have come. I can always lead us home, even if we don't find the pirgah.'

Mum just nodded. Dad was a soldier during the War—his war, World War II—and he had learned how to read maps, and although we didn't have an actual map he kept one in his head. He said good soldiers always did that, but maybe he was joking.

Just as Dad was looking at the sky and wondering whether we ought to go on because we had come a long distance, a man appeared, coming towards us. He was a hillman. You can tell them by what they wear, especially their kind of hat and the grey cloth baggy pants and the shirt which always hangs out.

The man seemed surprised to see us and he gave us a salute and said 'Salaam alaikum', which always sounded to me like 'Salaam ally coom'. We answered 'Alaikum salaam'. We all began asking him where the ziarat was and how we could get there. In the village of Ziarat most of the Pathans spoke a little English or a lot of Urdu, the language that both Mum and Dad had learned.

This man did not seem to know either Urdu or English. He was trying to understand us, but his face was screwed up with trying. It was then Dad gave his superior smile—the one he puts on when he speaks Urdu. He speaks

proper Urdu. Some call it 'high Urdu'. Mum? Her Urdu is called 'bazaary Urdu', the language the common people speak in the markets. Dad calls it 'jungly' because it is not pure. He teases Mum about it.

The hillman looked at Dad, puzzled at what he said. Then a smile lit his face. He had one sentence in English. It was, 'Me no spik Engraizi [English]'. With difficulty he got it out.

Dad was stunned. This man had mistaken his Urdu for English! We tried not to laugh, but the effort ended in giggles.

Mum began to talk in her bazaary Urdu, all the time her hands and arms going like windmills. The hillman listened and all of a sudden he gave a wonderful smile.

'Memsahib! Ziarat!' He understood her! Dad seemed a bit sad, but I think he was glad the hillman could understand Mum's talk.

Quite excited the man showed us where to go to find the ziarat, the famous pirgah. We were grateful to him and Dad offered him some money for his efforts. He looked at the money and shook his head. He was telling us out of friendship, and he looked as though he admired Mum and her language. He gave us back the money. When he waved goodbye to us he was so happy.

So were we. We were on the way to the pirgah.

At least that was what we thought. We followed the hillman's directions but we found no pirgah.

We were walking towards the sun. It was high in the blue sky and directly shining on our faces. As we walked a strange feeling came over us. All of us felt it at the same moment.

Dad who was a few feet ahead of us suddenly shouted, 'Stop!'

We all stopped in our tracks. Dad took two more steps, and when he turned his face was white with shock.

'My goodness!' he said, 'we could have gone over'. He kept his arms wide so that none of us could go past him.

We looked and what we saw was unbelievable. It was the most wonderful and powerful thing we had ever seen. We were right on the edge of a high precipice. A few steps further and we would have walked out into space, dropping thousands of feet below. Of course we would have been killed. We were a bit shocked by that danger, but it was the beauty of what we saw which captured us.

Below us lay what I think is the most glorious scenery in all the world. I am sure none of us will ever forget it. We could see what must be the largest crater in all this world, but it didn't look like a crater. It was just beautiful scenery, the high hills far, far away, a bit blue in colour, but with forests much higher than our juniper one, each hill being higher than the one in front of it. All around, the hills were the same. I remember trembling with the lovely sight and wanting to cry, but feeling very much like I do when I worship in church.

It was the silence that I think we will never forget. Everything was quiet and grand. Not even the sound of a bird. None of us spoke. We just looked and looked, stared and stared, and we seemed to be absorbing its greatness into ourselves. There is no other way to explain it.

Then Dad spoke. His voice was very soft and almost silent. It was like when he takes prayers. He seemed so humble. We all felt humble.

Dad said, 'Just turn around slowly and begin to walk away'.

Mum was holding Mary's little hand, and she was behind Ruth as we walked away, as though Ruth might

be drawn to run further out on the edge. Ruth was very quiet and she walked slowly away from the beautiful scene. When we had gone far enough away from the edge, Dad stopped and we all turned to look again at the wonderful panorama of the beautiful hills.

Dad said, 'I think it is getting a bit late, and we will not try to find the pirgah today. We will go home.'

We all felt relieved. The idea of going home was good, especially as Dad had the map in his mind. He really did have it you know, for he led us all the way home. We had to go through the juniper forest but there was still enough sun not to let it be dark at all. When we came out of the forest and saw our small English cottage below we wanted to cheer.

There was smoke coming out of one chimney. That would be the living room fire. The air was becoming cold, and we began to shiver. As we came close to the cottage we saw Farook, and he waved to us. He had the outside fire going under the big copper and we remembered it was the day for our baths.

Dad didn't groan as he often did at the thought of a bath. We knew ours would be in front of the fire, and there would be good fun. I suppose Mum was working out what tins she would open for supper. Perhaps Dad would go down when the meal was ready and buy nans and bring them back piping hot in a towel.

We didn't know what would happen, but we were so glad to be back, and Farook was salaaming and salaaming us, and we salaamed him and Dad teased him in Urdu and Farook was laughing his head off, whilst Mum hustled us inside.

All this was on the outside but inside we were all thinking of the edge of the precipice and how none of us had fallen over it, but how we had seen the most beauty—ever—in our lives in just a matter of some minutes and how we would never forget it.

I have to report that the event was some time ago, and that we have never yet got to see the ziarat of the old Muslim saint. Before his bath Dad went into the study and wrote a poem about the whole thing, and I thought you might like to read it. Sometimes I take it out and read it. I like it very much. It is called *The Crater*:

Once in the high Baluchi hills
Ten thousand feet into the peerless blue
Of the dry sky above Quetta,
We wandered in careless search
Of the ancient Ziarat,
That shrine of the Muslim saint,
The old peer of Mahomet
Who—long dead—
Imparted wisdom to his living devotees.

We wondered were we lost—
She, and the three children,
And I—we wondered
What might happen in these high hills
Where we met only one man,
And the goats
Stared thoughtfully from crag to crag.
We wondered whether
You could be lost for ever,
Staring at things
Like the wise mountain goats.

Almost without warning
We came across the crater.
We stood at the end of a million years
Nigh on toppling to a thousand feet below—
Ten thousand all in all.
Unwarned we could have walked
Into the peerless sky, the blue
Of the yawning heavens.
Suspended, standing at the sharp edge,
And—diminuted suddenly—
We marvelled at the beauty
Of this unheralded vastness.

The inner fears of a possible lostness
 Dissolved in the confronting magnitude.
 The ancient movement of the vast volcano
 Rehearsed itself so silently
 In our minds and spirits,
 Enlarging them until we understood
 The dimensions of us—of Man—
 And all creation. If—within ourselves—
 We had been dwarfed by life,
 Then suddenly we expanded
 Under the silent surging
 Of the magnifying magnificence.

There we remain in memory suspended.
 There we peacefully accept
 Our healing diminution.

No Life without Dryads

Andy Caper and I often met down on the South Coast region of South Australia around the Victor Harbor, Port Elliot, Goolwa area. Much of our married lives had been spent sharing time in each other's weekenders. Both our wives would work out which house we would use and that left us free to talk to our hearts' content.

Then Mary, Andy's wife died, and my wife Elaine preferred us to stay up in our Adelaide suburb, so that it was fairly rare for Andy and me to come together. When we did, it was generally without Elaine, but since she had the children and grandchildren who visited her in these weekends she didn't mind an occasional few days free of me. She also felt it would be good for Andy to have some male companionship, now that Mary was gone. Andy and I would arrange beforehand which house we would use, and for that matter whose launch. For the rest, our own families made good use of the weekend cottages and the sea craft.

On the one hand Andy had been a journalist and from that he has never really retired. He had gone on freelancing and his articles were popular. On the other hand he had also been quite a writer of fiction. He loved nothing more than to suddenly discover a new story. It was more than a hobby: you might say it was a kind of

passion with him. When he had written enough stories he would put them into book form and they were readily accepted for publication. He was also a dabbler with paints, though his first love was literature. As for me, I had long ago given over my accountancy firm to two of our sons, and so both of us men were virtually free to do what we desired. He was the willing slave, you might say, of his computer, whilst I liked to keep our garden rich with brilliant annuals and small flowering shrubs. What we loved most was fishing and yarning together.

It was this love of fishing which mainly drew us back, time and again, to the South Coast. Yet, even more than the fishing, it was the yarning which we liked. In some ways we let it all hang out; crazy ideas we had had down through the years were not too stupid for us to share. The yarning was like a safety valve by which we let off steam. Aussie males don't usually indulge in this sort of thing. In our case they do.

The particular day of which I am speaking was one when we were off Chiton Rocks, over against Port Elliot, anchored with the water lapping up against Andy's launch. Chiton Rocks has a life all of its own, and attracts water-lovers and many an artist because its rocks formations are unusual and the sea is rarely wild around that area. Naturally, as we fished, and talked, we often looked towards the town of Victor Harbor with its deep green Norfolk Island pines giving character to the foreshore.

As he baited a hook, Andy nodded towards the pines. 'They were not always there, you know', he said. 'Not native to these parts, but way back in the Harbor's history the Council thought they looked good. So did lots of other seaside councils throughout Australia. Now you can't think of Victor without thinking of the those pines.'

We were silent for a time, watching the horse-drawn tram being pulled slowly along the causeway leading from the Harbor foreshore to Granite Island. We knew the tram owner possessed a pair of beautiful Clydesdale mares. Those horses took our memories way back to our childhood; there had been plenty of draught horses on the farms before the tractors took over from them. Andy had grown up in Victor and knew every nook and cranny of the place, but my family had lived and farmed in the Strathalbyn district, not far from its fine old country town now part of the State's best history, and the darling of film companies who want to recreate some of that history.

Andy was in a mood for yarning. He liked to run new stories past me. Somehow he could build his yarn in this way, and later he would print it off the computer.

'After the war', he said, 'I had a job as a journalist on *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Lucky to get it, I was. The Army Rehabilitation people put me through a course, and that set me for life in journalism, but my real heart was in short stories. I thought maybe I might get into novels. Anyway I had a story or two accepted by *The Bulletin* and in those days that was about the best anyone could do.

'What I liked most was to get to know the good writers. It gave me a lift. It was quite a fascinating world to move in. It was all a bit bohemian, as I saw it, and since I was a bit of a timid guy, I kept away from too much partying. Just used to take tea-breaks or lunch times and wander off to the old *Bulletin* building and meet the editors and literary folk.'

Andy looked at me rather sadly. 'I really miss those men and women', he said. 'Most of them are dead now. Some of them who died are now quite famous for what they wrote and some are forgotten by the clever

literary critics of today. I don't really understand some of the present brilliant writers. I get a number of the small literary journals, but their kind of writing doesn't satisfy me; not really. I miss something in them the older writers gave us. Sometimes I reckon their writing won't last; not much of it anyway. I reckon that after a time some of the older writers will be rediscovered and we'll begin to think they were as good, if not better even, than Henry Lawson and the pioneers of his day.'

He sighed. 'I suppose this happens in every generation. The contemporary writers are talked about a lot. It is their hour, and then the younger ones push up, make their place and so, in turn, it is their hour.'

He felt a tug on his line, but it was nothing. The hook was empty. He rebaited it. 'I suppose I am like hundreds of old writers. Delighted if I can get a story accepted or a new book published, and am hopeful of a good press. Good press! You don't just get any reviews these days. Lucky if your book sells without getting remaindered quickly.'

'You were going to tell me a story, Andy', I reminded him gently.

He nodded, grinning faintly, but behind his fine old brown eyes there was a deeper shadow. I knew he was remembering something sad.

'Got to know specially one of those *Bulletin* writers', he said. 'We had a lot in common. We had both been trained in agricultural schools. Also we loved the land with something like a passion. One day he wrote a story that made me think we had gone to the same school, so I wrote to him, via the *Bulletin*, and had a reply. It seemed we had gone to different schools but had had much the same experiences. I was sure he was talking about some of my teachers. So we arranged to get together.'

This time there was a tug on his line and he played the fish gently until he was sure it was properly hooked and then drew it in. It was a large whiting, something we rarely caught, and we netted it aboard.

'Fancy that', he said, staring at it with some pleasure. 'Your Elaine likes whiting.' I remembered that his Mary had also liked whiting.

When he had rebaited and whipped out the line he sat back.

'This feller who was the writer you'd know well if I gave you his name, but I won't. Something happened to him later which wasn't good. We'll just forget his true name. We'll call him Paul.'

The shadow behind his eyes had deepened. He shook his head. 'I really came to like that feller; love him I suppose you would say. We got to know each other well. He stayed with me a couple of weekends, and Mary thought the world of him. Sometimes she would say, "There's something sad about him. You can tell by his eyes. He is alert, loves his writing, delights in our friendship and then—suddenly—you lose him."'

Andy paused and his rod hung loose in his hands. 'Terry, Mary was right. He was a sort of sad man, but then he could get up to high jinks too, and he had a terrific sense of humour. Most of his stories had humour in them, and others of them were just whimsical, which I suppose is a secret kind of humour. I just loved his characters and asked how it was he developed them. We used to exchange practical hints in regard to our writing. We would talk like that for hours. He had a high regard for my writing, thinking it was better than his, so you never know, do you?

'He invited me down to his home. I guess you would call it a farm, or a wheat and sheep station. He was no slouch as a farmer. He had the best equipment you could get. His farm was well organised. His ancestors

had been German and they had picked out the best soil in the Wimmera. You would have to say that whilst he was Lutheran he was as Australian as you can get them. He had a very beautiful wife who was blue eyed, dark haired, soft skinned and most intelligent. I think she worshipped him as a great writer. He adored her, of course, but in the beginning she neither wrote nor painted. Her outlet was music, the great operas and symphonies. The both of them had bought and saved records for years.

'She took me into the family immediately. She was warm and admiring. She seemed to adore us writers. That is why I liked going down to their farm weekends. They had two flax-haired boys who were just going off to board at the same agricultural school as their Dad had attended, so I saw little of them.

'Suddenly and unaccountably, Blaize his wife began to try herself at writing, and found she could write verse very well. *The Bulletin* occasionally published one of her poems, and Paul would get so excited. He was further delighted when she discovered she could paint. They both went a bit crazy over that. He would show me her latest effort with great pride.

"My stories don't come near her painting or her poetry", he would say. "I couldn't do that kind of thing." Sometimes I wondered at the shadows in his eyes when he talked about her. From just being a good wife, housekeeper and mother she was blossoming out into something special. Maybe he felt a trifle left behind.

'At the same time Paul, himself, was becoming quite famous. Critics were noting him. Then his first book of short stories was published. It caused quite a stir. Reviewers compared him with some of the old Australian writers—the famous ones. In a way I envied him his attainments. I wasn't in his class. The strange thing was that he seemed less assured of himself as a

writer each time he had a success. "You just never know", he would say to me with a shake of his head. His insecurity puzzled me.'

Andy took up the little slack that was on his line, but his thoughts were not with fishing. He looked at me, and I could see an element of misery in his eyes.

'You know, Terry', he said, 'that man and I had something in common, and you would never guess what it was'.

The misery dissolved and he grinned. 'Not in a hundred years would you guess.'

My own line was slack, but I was not interested in it. 'What was it then?' I asked. 'I give in.' My curiosity was growing.

'Dryads', he said. 'We had dryads in common.'

'Dryads', I said. 'What are dryads?'

Both of us had felt nibbles on our lines, but our minds were not on fishing. We would reset the bait mechanically, and cast the lines afresh. Maybe we knew the conversation today was a bit special and the fishing could come second.

'Dryads', Andy said, 'are a bit difficult to explain unless you have been brought up on them'.

He set his rod in a rowlock and leaned towards me. 'This is a really difficult story, Terry', he said. 'Kind of very delicate, and if you miss the dryad part you'll miss the whole story.'

'It came about like this. I went for a walk with Paul on the first day I was on his farm and we came to a clump of trees. His grandfather had always liked the forest way back in Silesia, when he was a boy, and he tried to build some forest on that Wimmera Farm. Farmers were land hungry and did not have much time for trees. So his grove of trees was a bit special.'

‘Anyway, we walked a little way into this clump of trees and Paul gave me one of those looks which made him different from all other men I have known. His eyes were full, glowing and mystical, and his voice a bit unsteady.

“I used to come here, thinking I might see dryads”, he told me, and there was no shame in his voice. “I’d sit for hours, listening to the birds, and hoping to catch sight of a dryad.” Then he laughed a slightly crazy laugh. “Mad, wasn’t I?” he said.

‘Straight as a die I answered him. “That wasn’t mad”, I said. “I was always looking for dryads at Victor Harbor when I was a boy, except that I mainly called them nymphs or naiads.”’

Andy stared down at his rod without seeing it. Then he lifted his eyes and stared thoughtfully at me.

‘You probably never had an English teacher who was set on the Romantic poets; you know, Keats and Wordsworth and those Lake Poets. They lived in a world of their own, those Romantics. It was of Nature, and myths and legends connected with Nature. They drew on the old classics of the Greeks and Italians, and so on. Dryads were part of their mythology; creatures which lived in forests and quiet groves, and were spirits of trees, of streams and even of oceans.

‘I turned to Paul and said:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.

‘He was delighted and so I went on, completing the first verse of Keats’ *Ode to a Nightingale*:

’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thy happiness,—

That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

‘I remember the delight on Paul’s face. “Then you must have thought the way I thought”, Paul told me. “I just longed for these delightful creatures to come dancing out to me and somehow take me into their bliss.”

‘He paused and looked at me again. “Do you still believe in dryads?” he asked, but his voice was somewhat guarded as though he did not want to be caught alone believing in these nymphic creatures.

‘I nodded a bit. “I always want to believe in something beyond what we see”, I said. Yet even I could not tell him what I had seen at Victor Harbor. Paul had never seen a dryad, and I suppose the realities of life had made him think he never would see one.

‘All he said was, “I’m glad you believe there’s something beyond what the senses perceive. I could never write if I didn’t believe that.”

‘I looked at him and said, “You are a Lutheran, aren’t you? I guess religious people think of things existing beyond the knowledge of the five senses.”

‘He gave me a faint smile. “One part of me is very orthodox”, he said. “Another part is, I suppose, what you might call, mystical. Maybe that is why I always seem to be in conflict.”’

We both withdrew our rods from the water and opened the lunch hamper. We munched on good food and drank hot coffee from the vacuum flasks.

My curiosity had been roused concerning Paul, so I asked Andy what had happened to him.

He did not immediately tell me. Instead he said, ‘I think something about Blaize disappointed him. I guess

she became less and less dependent upon him. He had been a sort of hero in her eyes, and there she was, dabbling quite successfully with paints, and writing poems that the small literary journals were accepting. Perhaps he thought he was passé in her eyes.

'I saw more and more of the shadows in his eyes and was puzzled. When I asked him he was at first secretive, and then he said a strange thing, "I don't think Blaize believes in dryads".

'I had enough sense to know that Paul didn't literally believe in dryads, and that he could not expect Blaize to believe in them. He saw my look of puzzlement and gave a faint smile.

"I guess I just want her to see something beyond what we grasp with the five senses", he said. "All she paints is good, but then realistic to the core. Same with her poems. She gets remarkable results from what is not especially remarkable. Yet something is missing."

'I wasn't too sure at the time what he meant, but later I understood. I was also deeply affected by his quoting of a verse from *Ode to a Nightingale*.

'He prefaced the quote by saying, "I often think much of our writing is empty. We are repeating ideas which have been mooted in every generation. It seems to me there is a veil behind which we cannot see, yet if we tried to see we might discover things beyond our dreams. It is what is behind that veil which really matters." Then it was he quoted Keats:

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!

Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

'Terry, something inside me shivered. I thought of Paul's writing success, his beautiful wife and her adventure into art, and of the two sons who would take over the large farm—dryad forest and all. I wanted, somehow, to get to Paul and tell him I had seen a dryad, but since that wasn't strictly true, I said nothing. I must admit that I felt Paul was withdrawing from us. I sensed it as a slow, fateful withdrawal; nothing could prevent it; nothing could stop it.

'I had watched Blaize over some months, and it was clear to me that a new world had opened up to her—the world of artists and writers. Paul was not a person for that sort of thing, and I suppose Blaize was excited in a way he could not understand. Their old relationship seemed to have diminished.

'Right at that moment I felt a sort of fear for Paul. "Maybe we make too much of dryads", I said. "Maybe these are a substitute for reality." I wanted to quote the last two verses from *The Ode* but I knew Paul would not hear them, though they were apt for the moment.

'Paul smiled a bit weakly. "You are a great comfort to me", he said. "You believe in dryads. It comes through in all your writing. That other world is just below the surface of your words." His smile became a strong grin. "Dryads aren't publishing material. Editors and publishers are really hard nuts. They know what sells and what doesn't. It is a long way we are from the Romantics."

Andy chewed on a sandwich. 'We left New South Wales and made our way back here to Adelaide. As you know, I was given a good job on *The Advertiser* and have been writing ever since. A year after we settled here I heard news that Paul had committed suicide. They

found him hanging from one of the trees in that forest clump. Mary and I shed a lot of tears. I didn't know what to write to Blaize, especially because I sensed that, in some unconscious way, she had contributed to his death. I never did discover the story behind the story. I never wanted to do so. I just think of Paul as a special writer, and a Romantic. I get that idea every time I read his books, and I still read them a lot.'

We had finished our meal and were bowed as often older men are when they give special thought to matters like Paul's death.

I looked up at Andy and said, 'I think he must have lost his wife and he despaired of getting her back'.

Andy nodded. 'Of course', he said, 'but then the curious thing was that he was asking the impossible. She moved in another world where everything was becoming more and more exciting—poetry, music and art. Not that Paul didn't understand this world, and in some ways enjoy it, but he was fixated on what lay beyond human sight. I'm sure he wasn't foolish enough to think there were actual dryads, but he wanted to touch what he could not see.'

'Then tell me about the dryad that you did see, or reckoned you saw', I demanded quietly.

He stared at me for a moment. Then he pointed towards Victor Harbor.

'Over there was bush such as I never saw in the Wimmera. It started at the shore, just above the sand, and to begin with it was partly twisted, partly grown low with the constant strong sea breezes that would sweep in over it. Had done so for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years. Then it thickened around the two rivers, which we white people called the Hindmarsh and Inman Rivers. You know them. We've both canoed along them and fished from them. Absolutely silent

they are. I've never known rivers so silent. These days you might call them sluggish because of a certain amount of pollution, but somehow the inflow of the ocean kept them pure when we were boys.

'I loved them both, with the melaleucas, the tea-tree and the swamp shrubs, along with some mangroves, here and there. Behind them the grasses grew tall; old native grasses they were, and eucalypts, some of them stubby by nature, others just stunted and a few of them beautiful in their coloured trunks, sometimes with shrivelled bark and other times smooth as a woman's thigh. I liked the rich bird life, the masses of insects—butterflies, beetles, wasps and bush bees. I loved the honeyed scents on the days when the wind came from the north and blew everything hot, sometimes to tinder dryness, and no wonder that bushfires broke out and temporarily blackened that resort of native dryads, but then it would become green again, and again I would feel it to be fey.'

Andy had a shrewd look. 'You didn't really expect that, did you?'

I shook my head. 'No: not from you Andy. You've always been a realist. I wouldn't expect you to think of dryads or naiads.'

'They were my Romantic days', Andy said, the smile gone and a dreamy look in its place. 'I would spend hours reading Keats and Wordsworth, Byron and the Brownings. I wanted an Australian world beyond the world we saw. I doubt whether there was much difference between Paul and me. The only difference was I went to a war and Paul didn't. As you know, a war tells you of things beyond sight, and some of them are very ugly and menacing and some have a mysterious beauty, but they are stronger stuff than dryads. Paul had tried to enlist in the Forces, but farmers were in a reserved occupation and because Paul could handle his

whole farm—his wheat and sheep—by himself, they never let him enlist. Maybe a war would have knocked the dryad stuff out of him. I doubt it.’

‘And your dryad?’ I persisted.

‘We are almost there’, Andy grinned, ‘but I guess you won’t be very impressed. She was what you might call a native dryad. She was a bush girl, an Aborigine.’

I sat up. ‘Aborigine?’ I asked, ‘and in Victor Harbor?’

He nodded. ‘Victor was the territory of the Ngarrindjeri tribe. Had been for millenniums. They were peaceful and happy people. Quite noble, in fact. The British who settled there would have died without those original inhabitants of the land. The Ngarrindjeris fished from the rivers and the surf and fed the white folk when their crops failed. For their goodness the Aborigines were eventually moved to a native reserve! They were a bit of a problem to the tourist trade, you know. That trade had begun a long way back. Even so, there were a few who stayed on and they lived in one or two houses and mainly kept to themselves.

‘One of them was Leonie. At least that was her name to us. She kept her tribal name to herself, but she was determined to have white education and in fact had to have it. She had a smaller sister and two older brothers. Her father was a worker for a timber firm who supplied firewood. Folk in the town respected them, even though they never understood them.’

I was puzzling about an Aboriginal girl being a dryad.

Andy laughed at me. ‘Leonie was two years older than I but was in my class. She was real enough. She dressed always in gingham, in a loose sort of dress. You might say it was always brightly coloured, suiting her person. She had to wear shoes but they were like tight-fitting slippers. She never seemed to make a sound when she walked. She gave the impression of low flying. I don’t know why I always thought of her flying.’

Andy smiled and his eyes had a dreamy look in them. ‘Maybe you think this is a bit of an anticlimax to my story of Paul, but, Terry, I saw this dryad, and it was certainly Leonie herself. I would often go out in the early morning, generally before dawn, for I would like to see Encounter Bay as the light came up before the sun, and the water was a soft silver. I loved that time in the morning. Afterwards I would go fishing. Believe me or not this slim dryad, clothed in some white soft, filmy material, would move—fly you might say—just above the thick grasses and sea-herbs which grow down to the edge of the beach. The strange thing is that she never floated and never walked, nor for that matter did she seem to run. No: she flew. Her feet moved as one who runs, yet she flew. I tell you, Terry, she was the girl I would see later that day at school, and then she had no such diaphanous clothing. Then she would be dressed in her usual gingham frock, and her hair was different. It seemed almost silver in the early morning, but at school it was black, long and tied with a red ribbon behind her neck.

‘The strange thing, Terry, was that it did not seem uncanny. It seemed ever so natural. I guess I was soaked in Keats and the Lake Poets and thought it reasonable. But then why would she pass in the early mornings, and later be at school? Was it some tribal secret she knew, some strange and wonderful thing out of the Dreaming. What was it?’

I smiled. ‘Maybe you wanted a dryad all to yourself. The power of yearning and imagination may have been all you needed.’

As Andy talked I looked across to Encounter Bay from our position at Chiton Rocks. I had no mind or heart to refute him. My own Dreaming had been in those early years and that helped me to understand both Andy and Paul. I had been every bit as mystical as they. It had taken a World War to knock that kind of mystical

stuffing out of me, but I shivered a trifle as Andy finished his story and was staring across where he had had an experience of a dryad. I sensed he was seeing Paul's eyes, dreamy as his own on the first occasion when Paul showed him the grove of trees on his Wimmera property. I sensed that something of Paul had never left Andy: the War had not really destroyed the beauty of youth's idealistic fantasy. If we have experienced it in childhood then that sort of thing remains with us until death, but then I wondered whether Paul would have lived on, even until now, had he seen Leonie fly over the sea grasses of Encounter Bay. The line between reality and human fantasy is a fine one and not at all as the folk of the New Age would have us believe.

It came to me then that Paul was a musical instrument, too finely tuned so that when the song came to him, and his hunger for beauty overpowered him, he would not be able to resist the call to something beyond him. I was sure, then, that Keats' poem had at last overwhelmed him and he was truly in love with 'darkling death', believing it would lead him beyond his present pain and yearning to something more beautiful:

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
 I have been half in love with easeful Death,
 Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
 To take into the air my quiet breath;
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
 In such an ecstasy!
 Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
 To thy high requiem become a sod.

Andy and I were both silent, hearing the water lap against our boat, but having lost the desire to fish. The

thought of Paul was about us, and I supposed Andy was wondering whether he should have told me his childhood fantasy, but then it was no fantasy for him, and for that matter no fantasy to me. Death to me was a door that opened on something that made fantasy seem but a pale shadow, but at that moment Andy and I were not thinking about death. We were both thinking of a wonderful man named Paul, the fine writer who always saw beyond what we call 'the real', and that was occupying our minds even as Andy was calling the marine engine into life and we were on our way to Encounter Bay where the sea-herbs and the sea grasses grow thick on the edge of the ocean.

You cannot tell a story like this without pondering all its implications, and I knew we were both contemplating it as we moved, prow-high towards the Bay. Some folk reading our tale would think it all strange, a trifle foolish and even smacking of New Age fantasy. We would not blame them for that for it could just be the nostalgia of two old men who wished their pasts to contain mystery above the crass, dead level of everyday existence that many believe is the way life—no adventure, no thrills, flat and plain, and dull! We, too, did not believe there had ever been dryads on Paul's farm, or that Leonie was a dryad in her secret moments. I sensed Paul's mind as the high spray broke over our heads, and it was as mine. We both knew that humanity cannot live without a sense and an experience of that which is above nature.

I murmured to myself, not thinking Andy would hear me, but he did, and he nodded. I was saying, 'There is more to nature than just nature. There just has to be.'

After nodding again, Andy said, 'I was just thinking of some words I learned when I was a boy. I've carried them with me and they help me to understand what a

person is about in life.’ He cut the ignition and let the boat slide silently towards the low mooring jetty. ‘These are the words’, he said, ‘the kind of words we need to remind us that there is more to life than ever we have dreamed’. As he quoted them there was a dreamy look in his eyes.

He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Oh! Canola! Canola!

I hesitate to name the Canola man, but I can't get it out of my mind that he was Charley, or Charles or Chas, and even 'Chicker', as they used to call him when he went first to the local primary school, later to the district high school, and—still later—to work at Elders. Charley Schilling we all knew him to be, and he didn't like it if you left the 'c' out of his surname. He used to say that if you left it out then he wasn't worth two bob—only one shilling, like.

Charley wasn't what you might call brilliant, although he was reasonably intelligent. He worked for Elders, the well-known agricultural firm, selling farm equipment, farm goods, acting as agent for farmers, and financing men on the land, as well as selling property, not only in little old South Australia, but through most States of Australia.

You don't have to be university material to work with Elders, though some of the managerial folk are qualified that way. Charley liked his job right from the time he left school and worked as a salesman in one of Elders' country stores. Out of respect for Charley I won't mention the name of the town itself, but I give you a hint that it was in that fairly wide area which takes in towns like Jamestown, Georgetown, Burra, Laura and even Gladstone and Balaklava. If you've lived in one of those towns you've really lived in all of them, as they are much of a muchness.

By the time our interesting story takes place, Charles Schilling had retired. This happened just after Julia his wife had died. The four children were all married and scattered as far abroad as Adelaide, Darwin, Melbourne and Perth. Whether it was the genes of their Dad or their Mum you could not tell, but they all turned out to be very vital and adventurous types, not at all like Charles, and not much like Julia. Anyway they were gone, and the three boys were carrying on the Schilling dynasty in other places. The daughter Ella was with husband Ray, raising her daughters in Darwin.

So much for the family. In a way it was a good thing they were not still in their hometown, or when Charley disappeared that day they would have been alarmed, and probably would have sent out patrols everywhere trying to find him. They might even have thought of him as having early dementia and would have been unduly alarmed. As it happened not one person, not even Charley's neighbours, noticed he was missing. Ella rang daily, but as Dad was often out she never thought much of missing him or, rather, him missing.

What happened was that Charles was on his daily exercise of walking. His only exercise apart from this was pottering about in his vegetable garden. He was not in the clique that played bowls and was never at the clubhouse. He only ever visited the RSL when invited. During World War II he had been in a reserved occupation. Now he was nigh on eighty and felt it was in order to rest for the most part.

He liked walking very much. He found his thoughts flowed smoothly when he walked. He had a mind which made vivid pictures. He also had a memory which had been clear from birth or thereabouts. He liked remembering things which had happened when he was a child.

He also remembered his dreams, dreams he had away back then, but dreams which, sadly for him, had never been fulfilled. Because he was by nature a shy man, he had never sought to fulfil those beloved dreams. He had just hoped they might come true, but for the most part they hadn't.

This morning he had set out on his usual path across the field from the rear of the town. He could hear the great semitrailers and huge road trains thundering through the town, and the noise of them gradually diminished as he cut across the Kaisers's property, making his way towards the faraway hills. Apart from an occasional flock of Adelaide rosellas and a few screaming corellas, he now heard nothing. He was out in the early spring, cutting across the wheat and barley paddocks and well on his way to the canola crop.

For those who do not know the name 'canola', let me tell you it is really rape which has been somewhat changed in its essence by special plant breeding so that a harmful element has been removed. Oil is then extracted from the seed and, when it is crushed, that extract is turned into margarine and cooking oil. Of course it is much in demand. Much of Australia is alive with canola-growing. If you were to stand at the edge of the town we are talking about, and if you were to look around, then you would see the country as perhaps the most brilliant in all the world, what with its deep green of the cereal crops, and its bright yellow of canola, with an occasional grove of trees to relieve the brilliance of the landscape. A sort of a Vincent Van Gogh painting: intense blue of the skies and then these bands of green and yellow. Nothing much else, really, but it always gave Charles a good feeling. Of course, there were clumps of tall eucalypts, and beyond it all to the west were the low hills, ancient ranges where the bush seemed to melt into opalescent greys and blues.

Charley had been making the momentous decision for some weeks. Each day he would proceed further into the pastures, past the cereal crops, almost reaching the canola, but since the man had to think of his return journey, he had hesitated to penetrate the lovely golden crop: that is, until today. This morning he had reached it because there was some kind of agitation in his mind, and there was an increase of excitement in his heart. What looked like a yellow ocean before him was suddenly to exercise an influence on him. He had thought of the crop as being two or three feet in height, but in fact it was no less than six feet, and often higher. He had thought of canola as a delicate, blossoming plant with fernlike leaves and blooms, but he saw it was quite sturdy with stalks a half inch in width. His childish idea of sprawling out in it and then looking up at the sky and imagining himself in a silent sea of flower and foliage melted away.

Even so, he felt something mystical, some power drawing him into itself. It was a kind of fascinating beckoning which faintly frightened him, but strongly drew him. Suddenly he made the decision and walked into the crop. After all, it would not be a long way to the other side. Maybe a quarter or half a mile: no more. So he strode into it, reckless of the long return journey it might entail. Glad of his old straw hat to protect him from the bright sun, he made his way through the canola.

He had allowed his reminiscing mind to take over as was his practice on such walks, and so pictures from the past began to rise in his imagination. Most of them concerned his Julia, for she was never far from his mind. Julia had always pleased him. She understood him and his dreams, and she had dreams of her own. Often they would exchange their dreamings, laughing at each other, but enjoying it immensely. He had been

busy with his work, especially when he climbed the Elders' staff ladder in his slow and persistent way. She had her interests in the town, and most of all she cared for the children. Maybe they had both somehow imparted something of their dreams to the children, for no sooner had they reached early adulthood than they were off, trying out their own special ambitions in other places.

Today Charles felt he had somehow achieved an ambition. He was not quite sure what it was, but he felt the day was good about him. The fresh country air stimulated him, the faint scent of the yellow blossom crop created a pleasant feeling as his feet were moving and pressing through the lightly resistant canola. Somehow he was making progress, though to what point, he was not quite sure.

Perhaps it was the silence which was most pleasing of all. In wheat, oats and barley, the crops flow with every movement of the breeze. You are in an ocean, but for the most part you are its master. In this tall crop you were under its control, its supervision. You moved by reason of its grace and not your own achievement.

After a time he forgot about the crop and felt it as a living thing. There was no 'it' here, but a general 'you' or an intimate 'thou'. It somehow enfolded him but did not press or choke him. He was free to move in it, and for what it was, to be one with it, though what it was he did not know. Perhaps the scent of the bloom was too heady, too much a drug, slightly dazing him. He felt drowsy, but not enough to have to sit or to lie and sleep. Whatever was this strange case, he just felt responsibility drop away from him. He was in a vast, flimsy forest of stem and blossom. He was in another world.

That was it—'another world'! He liked that. It had been part of his past dreaming, that he would one day

inhabit a world into which no one else had ventured—a new world, a quiet and a gentle world. Well, this was it. He stood still and stared. Of course he could not stare much about him as the canola was well over his head. If anything it was growing taller than it had been at the headland. It was at the sky he stared most. Deliberately he ceased walking, stood still amidst the crop and gazed upwards. Something in his spirit drank in the royal blue of the sky.

He remembered when he had been at high school, and the colour of his house had been royal blue and gold. Just like today! He had been a runner in those days, and when they gave him a medal it was hung on a gold and blue ribbon. Funny how things like that were coming back to his remembrance. Come to think about it, that was the day he had first met Julia, consciously. Of course she had always been there, since kindergarten, but that day—the day of his only medal ever—she had looked different. Yes, she had been different. He had covered her over with his incessant dreaming. He had not thought of girls, and certainly not of them as being beautiful. Suddenly he had seen her as beautiful. He remembered her shy congratulations. Some kind of loyalty to each other had been born. He had felt poetry bubbling up in him, but never had he dared write it. Even now—at this moment—it seemed that the bubbling was starting afresh within him.

It was late in the day when he realised he had not come to the other side of the canola. He felt the cool of the early spring dropping down from the impeccable blue. He shivered slightly, and the shiver was tinged with fear. He was quiet, rooted to stillness in the silent canola. It was saying nothing to him. He had a faint wish that the fragrance of the blossom would diminish, go away, but it stayed. Nothing changed in this world of

strong canola. It insisted on being itself, even of reigning over his humanity. The uncanniness of it did not disturb him to begin with but then he felt a trifle uneasy and drifted into a conversation with Julia. He had done that lately when all the changes about him had been worrying. He knew she was not here, that she had gone beyond him, and that it was futile resenting her for that. Even so, he wanted her to listen.

Suddenly he said, 'Julia, I'm lost!' His voice did not echo. The sturdy crop ate his words and they were gone.

He said, more insistently, 'Honey, I'm lost!' He added, with a sob, 'Terribly, terribly lost. The canola has eaten me up!'

He had to laugh querulously at that. Canola couldn't eat anybody. His laugh sounded empty and desperate. He wasn't really laughing. Maybe he was partly hysterical.

He tried to stand on his toes and look over the crop, hoping to see the line of high trees over where the creek wound its way through them, but he could see nothing. The canola, here, was high, very high. He remembered that some farmers left stumps in their field, cultivating around them, and not taking them out. He tried to remember whether he had passed a stump, but no memory came.

He stood still. The silence stood with him. The rustling of his moving feet had ceased. No sound could be heard, but his own breathing. It sounded so loud that it frightened him. He was listening for the sound of parrots. Near the evening time they would fly over and if he could get their direction he would go that way. He knew, now, that he had not been moving in a straight line.

'Dear Julia', he thought, 'where am I?' Just where am I?

It was then the flock of corellas flew over. He saw the faint pink of their underwings, and their heads. The rest of them was white, snowy white. Their long calls were like music in his ears. Back at the town he had often scolded them in his mind for their evening cacophony as they fluttered and screamed in the high gums, prior to settling for the night.

He felt the thrill of their noise and the fact that it was breaking the power of the silent canola. He loved their riot of flight as they swooped and flitted and flatted over the crop, high, high above him. He stared at them, greedily drinking in their feathered fellowship. He loved them.

Then they were gone. He could not define their direction. They had fluttered up into the sky as though high, giant hands had first gathered them and then thrown them up, so that they fell in all directions like white, screaming ticker tape, but flying in no one particular direction. The tears gathered in his eyes. A mild man, he had rarely known rage, but now he knew rage. He cursed the birds silently.

As a boy he had thought the Cubs and Scouts were a joke. He was too masculine to join them. He had reasoned that they were sissy, but he knew part of the truth was that he did not like groups and crowds. He liked his own thoughts, was content with them, and was really a hermit, when it came to his peers. True, he had a few friends, his real mates, but they were dead now. Julia and the children had for the most part occupied his adult years. At the thought of Julia he felt the tears reforming in his eyes.

The shade of the evening kept dropping until it had filled the blue bowl. That cupola had faded to a delicate colour, almost a pastel grey. He tried to detect the west

by the pink of the dying sun, but the crop was too high for that. The tears now were of anger, and not of self-pity.

He made a decision.

‘I’ll walk straight’, he said. ‘I’ll make sure I don’t veer to the left or the right or whatever a lost person does.’

He lifted his arms and chest as though in power walking. He kept his head rigid and erect. He refused to look to the right or left. His hands were gripped firmly, fingers into his palms. He breathed the crisp air of the late day. On and on he went, and when the grey had drained from the sky and the darkness seemed to rush in on its exit, he made another decision.

He would run. He knew he would do damage to the crop, but he would run. He ran. He tried to lift his feet but the strong stems of the canola seemed knitted together, a wall of strong stems to thwart his ambitions, withholding him, until he knew he could move only at a dribbling pace. He fell back into walking.

Bushmen would have told him how to use his watch during the day, find north and walk towards it. At night he should have fixed his mind on a star, that bright star that was even now shining on him, but some magic had worked in him, some kind of mixed fear and delight. He was fixed here for ever! He could not get out of the crop. The canola had claimed him. He was a doomed man, but then one with a delightful doom—absorption into this field of rape. His mind moved in this weird direction. The canola would cannibalise him, and he would be one with its nature, for ever!

It was then that he knew it had been predestined for him never to get out of the canola field. This was no ordinary crop, no real crop in fact. No: it was a fantasy crop, a fairy crop, a supernatural creation. It was not like most crops of sixty acres or maybe even eighty

hectares. No: the canola itself was not real. Sure, it appeared to be real, but now it was dark and close and embracing, and it would never let him go free.

When he had become tired he sat in the crop. Looking up from that position he saw the crop slowly covering him over, the plants rejoining themselves, becoming one dark block of solid vegetation. Sure, he could see stars but they were high up in the velvet night. They had no communication with him, no personal link. They hung as was determined for them. He and they were for ever apart.

It did not seem strange to him that he felt no hunger. His inner feelings were turbulent, and food seemed like a thing foreign to his mind. He knew he could chew some of the canola stems and foliage, and the sap of it would not harm him. Not unless he chewed too much of it. He knew it belonged to the same family as cabbage and cauliflower and turnips, but he did not want to eat anything at this moment.

The night was cold, but he was tired and he slept. Somewhere, in the depths of his dreams he thought he heard rustlings, small creatures moving through the crop, but then he did not know, now that he was in a crop. He was in another world in which Julia would be present for a while before being gone, and the children would come and go, and his friends at Elders would call in on him, until it seemed that life was a flurry of people and happenings. Only just before morning did his churning dreams cease and a deep sleep come to him.

He wakened with the cries of the corellas and the yellow-crested white cockatoos in the distance. He felt strangely refreshed. He stood up, working his frozen limbs into actions which brought circulation of his blood.

He stamped his feet to get them warm. He stared up at the sky which was working its colour into a deeper blue than the pastel shade which had come with the first light. From somewhere pinks had come to suffuse the bowl of the heavens. Then the old brilliance broke through afresh, and the canola blazed into full colour of vivid yellow.

Someone had drugged his mind. On the one hand it could not face the reality of his lostness, and on the other it seemed sedated so that he had no fear of what might happen. Some men he knew might become afraid of death, but death did not worry him. From way back in his life he had settled that question by the ancient faith of his fathers. Now humour teetered at the back of his mind, the ridiculous matter of being lost in a canola paddock of less than a hundred hectares. He wanted to laugh but he was afraid to break the silence by his own crazy laughter.

He just thought about it all, and as he did there came to his mind a story he had forgotten. It was about another man who had been eaten up by a paddock of canola grown for oilseed. He had been told the strange story but had had difficulty in believing it. Yet he had never quite disbelieved it. The man had not been missed, and had wandered in tiring circles until, as he had said, he was near-crazy. He had broken out of the crop, weak and unable to walk. A farmhand had seen him and gone for his utility truck to take him to the farmhouse. When he returned he saw the man collapsed and had rushed him to the hospital. The fellow lived but nothing would ever get him near a canola crop again. Charles pondered this story, knowing now that it must have been genuine.

Charles Schilling, the octogenarian, began to instruct himself. No matter how hopeless the matter might

appear, he would not panic. He held out little hope of his neighbours wondering at his absence and questioning it. They would think he had gone off on some business, or even to his children in Adelaide or elsewhere. He would not let himself think of another day in the crop. The idea was plain crazy and a man must not give in to it.

He stood and plucked some of the soft greenery of the plant, succulent stems with flowers, and began to chew it. It was not unpleasant even if slightly hot to his taste. He knew human stomachs were not like those of ruminants—cows, deer and rabbits. He chewed slowly and thoughtfully.

One thing was amiss. His dreams seemed to have gone. The mystical beauty which had always gripped him in nature—crops and trees, pastures and animals—seemed to have faded. His interest also seemed to have dried up. His thought of plain reality was now taking him over. He imagined an Aborigine being in his position. He would soon have some food, but then an Aborigine would never walk into a canola crop. He would be too canny for that. These indigenous people were hunters and gatherers, not farmers and graziers. Besides, Aborigines would have had something better to do than grow endless miles of cereals and oil-seed crops!

* * * * *

Bacon and eggs! In his mind he could smell them, a delicious breakfast. The fragrance of hot tea, the crisp toast soaked in butter. He almost wept. By contrast to this delightful fantasy he saw the long day, the sun rising, the constant yellow before him, the blue, cloudless sky above, the inevitable circling of his tired body in this canola prison and his pathetic applications to Julia.

The thought of it all made him begin to weep. He knew it was quite possible that he would never emerge from this gold-and-green captivity. He felt a great weariness. Perhaps he could just go to sleep and that would be that.

It was then he saw the green pasture. He was not looking to find the end—or the beginning—of the crop, but there it was. Just through the sturdy stalks of the canola was green pasture! To right and left were cereal crops but he ignored them: they were harmless to imprison him. At first he thought all of it might be an hallucination: people in these situations did hallucinate.

He scarcely dared part the canola stalks, but the more he parted them the more the reality grew on him. He had come to the edge of the cultivated field, and there, just beyond the yellow crop, was a fence with posts and netting and barbed wire. He pushed the last of the crop aside and rushed out of it, his arms reaching out to the beloved fence. In a few moments his tired body had climbed over it and he was running across the paddock.

Miraculously he had emerged on the same side of the crop as he had entered it. Far across the green paddock he could see his home, and the thought of eggs and bacon was beguiling his mind, causing it to hasten his weary body to its wonderful goal.

As he neared the house he looked cautiously from right to left. His neighbours must not see him: they must never know what had happened. He opened his back gate and was hurrying up the path to the back door.

Old Ted Gillespie had spotted him coming.

‘Hullo there, Charles’, he shouted. ‘Wherever have you been?’

‘Been?’ said Charles. ‘What do you mean, been?’

'Missed seeing you yesterday', said Ted. 'Didn't see you out in the garden.'

'Ah', said Charles as though hugging a mystery to himself. 'Well, I had something very special going on yesterday. That's why you didn't see me.'

He nodded his head. 'Very special it was', he said. 'But now I am going to get a bit of breakfast.'

Ted Gillespie seemed surprised and a trifle puzzled. 'Thought you would have had your breakfast before you went for your usual stroll', he said.

Charley Schilling nodded. 'Mostly I do that', he agreed, 'but today things are, ah, a bit different'.

Ted smiled at his neighbour. 'Well, have a good breakfast', he said.

Charles, who felt knives were having a battle within him, nodded again. 'I'll do that Ted', he said. 'Yes, I'll do that.'

He hurried inside. It took him no time to have the kettle boiling and the old teapot sending off it fragrant steam. Even stronger was the fragrance of bacon and eggs. Before he knew it the toaster was popping two golden slices of toast.

As he buttered the toast, shook salt and pepper over the egg, and sipped his delicious tea, his mind had begun to work; at the way he would appear to the neighbours and all the folk of his gossip town.

'Went out early', he would tell them, 'before most folk are up, and walked as far as the canola crop. That's a long way for an old feller like me, so I decided to come back. It's a long walk for anyone before breakfast, but the exercise was good.'

No need for them to know about his twenty-four hours or so in a bright yellow-and-green canola crop. They would never guess, of course, what this trip was that he had had, firstly into pleasure and then into terror. What had happened was an adventure he would

keep to himself, and, of course, to Julia also. As for the rest, no, he wouldn't even tell the children and the grandchildren. They need never know.

As he chewed his toast he tasted afresh the dreams and sensations of yesterday. He knew he would mouth them, time and again, throughout this day, and for that matter all the days yet left to him.

A Vagrant Memory, A Vagrant Child

Most of us have minds in which all our memories are complete: anyway, reasonably complete. Over the years we have pondered strange memories but tied them off, having come to understand them fully. We are the kind of human beings who don't like puzzles unsolved, or mysteries too vague to be understood. I have one such memory. I call it a vagrant memory because every so often it comes up. It is a memory of the road from Mersing on the east coast of Malaya, through to the beginning of the causeway from Johore Bahru to Singapore Island. It is a memory of the early months of 1942. It is a memory which tantalises because it baffles. I cannot properly get hold of it.

From time to time I have met some of my old friends in the AIF who were on that withdrawal from Mersing to Singapore. Our particular group—our Signals group, part of a larger Signals company—travelled in a couple of Army trucks. I was in charge of the Line Section and we travelled mainly in one truck, but at least two of us had motorcycles, one a BSA and the other a Norton. We loved our motorcycles. They served us well for many purposes.

Our job and our love was signal work, and for our little specialist group there was the responsibility of laying

cables which became lines of communication once they were joined with receiving instruments such as special phones for both morse code and human speech. At one time we were patrolling and servicing about 120 miles of such cable. I can see us as we dealt out the Army red cable from a spewer machine, or as we used the civil overhead metal lines. These civil lines had been delivered into the hand of our Army. It was quite a job, and if ever I get the time, and you would like to hear me, I will talk more about it. I am so on in years now that even that promise may be a bit of a dream, that is, my hoping to tell it as we used to do it over fifty-five years ago. Today there are better, more wonderful methods which are used, but we thought our methods and machinery to be quite wonderful.

Anyway, what I was going to talk about was this memory which even now keeps eluding a solution. It began at the time when some of the Malay folk fled Mersing because the Japanese were about twenty-six miles distant. We saw the Malays, Indians and Chinese all disappear in trucks and buses, on bicycles or on foot, so in a short time you could not see even one of them. We were going to fire the town to give us a clear sight out to sea when the Japanese Navy would appear. We were not immediately withdrawing from it because our Brigadier wanted us to stay on and make Mersing into a Malayan Tobruk. He wanted it to be an island in the midst of the enemy. We were to be a fortress bristling with powerful defences, but the Brigadier was not allowed to carry out his plan. At that time we were burning the houses, shops and stalls along the waterfront, but, by the time we had completed this work, we were told to get into the order of strategic withdrawal and make our way to Singapore Island. Because we had to meet up at a certain point with other Allied troops withdrawing down along the western coast whilst

fighting a rearguard action with the enemy Japanese, we were not withdrawing too rapidly.

Well, it was raining heavily that first night and we were on the lookout for Japs who might have filtered through to Mersing from the east coast, nearby. It was then that this strange thing happened. It was then we discovered this rather plump baby which had been left behind, alone, having lost its parents. At least that was what we surmised. I mean we surmised he was an orphaned baby boy.

Well, he was a boy all right, and he looked like a baby, but it was after 'the stoush'—meaning the war with the Japanese—that I began to have strange thoughts about this baby. These ideas started even when we were travelling towards Singapore Island. They increased when we went into the Japanese Prison Camp of Changi, and they are still with me.

You might think I am having hallucinations in my old age, that I am in the first onset of dementia, but I tell you, no! Every word I am writing is the truth, although the whole truth never came through to any of us. That is why the memory is so puzzling.

You see it was a small boy, a baby that walked and talked very well in the Malay language, but he looked as though he was a very intelligent child, scarcely out of his babyhood. There seemed to be nothing that he did not know. I had never learned the Malay language, or rather I had learned only a few greetings, and that was all. So it was Bobby Hook, one of our line section, who translated. He talked quite fluently with the little fellow. Bobby just loved to talk to humans in any language.

When I say 'little fellow', he wasn't little, but quite plump, quite strong and well muscled. *Moreover he seemed like a mature person!* I have to put that sentence in italics because it is the heart of the mystery. While I am saying these things you will think that my

natural imagination, which is always good for a bit of fiction, is now running riot. You will think that I am making a story where there was none. Wrong: this little fellow was so attractive—lovely, you might say—that we all fell in love with him. He obviously hadn't eaten for days. He seemed hungry and gobbled up what we gave him and came back for more. He talked volubly and Bobby had difficulty trying to keep up with him.

I didn't have any suspicions at the time but only wondered that he was so young and yet seemed to have the maturity of a child, even of a middle teenager; you might say, even, of a young man.

I suppose I should have been suspicious but all our fatherly instincts were roused. By the Army rules and regulations we were never allowed to have anyone in our team or tent who was not a bona fide member of the Army. That was a strict regulation. Yet we gave him the freedom of our tents. He came in and out as he liked and we all wanted to do a bit of fathering of him even though we were young—most of us in our early twenties. Yet there was old Griff who was in his thirties and had a bit of grey hair to show. He was the real father figure because he had children.

We fed the young fellow, wondering whether the diet was right and it seemed to be so. When we went through villages which had been abandoned we found foods—tinned and otherwise—in the cold stores, so that for the most part we ate well. Army rations, of course, are always kept up to the troops and in action we carry more than usual.

Along the road to Johore—quite a long trip—we took turns to watch over the young child. I admit that I have forgotten his name, so we will call him Beulah, but we did not know whether he was of Muslim origin or of Indian Hindu background. We were not experts on those kinds of things at that time.

Now the strange thing about the lad was that he would sometimes disappear. He would disappear for the night, but in the morning we would find him. He always managed to make his way to our tents, wherever they were set down. He loved sitting on the back of our motorbikes. He was forever asking about this and about that.

I forget, also, the name of our Intelligence officer. I am almost certain his name was Neville Bathgate. A lieutenant, of course. He came in one day and saw young Beulah and he was puzzled.

‘You men shouldn’t have this little fellow with you’, he said, and he seemed suspicious of him.

‘Aw come on lieut’, we said, ‘what harm is there in looking after this little chap? He has lost his parents. Maybe on Singapore Island he will find them.’

He thought about this for a while and then nodded. ‘OK’, he said. ‘Just keep your eye on him all the time.’

I wondered what he meant by this. It was at this point that I began to have the most amazing ideas. ‘This little chap is a dwarf’, I said to myself. I went to him and picked him up. He seemed especially fond of me, as though I figured largely in his affections. He began to show his affection and I felt ashamed of my suspicions. I just played with him and then was called to the mobile signal office—a truck—and I had to sort out some line connections.

Another thought used to come to me. ‘When Beulah goes off wandering, how come he can easily find his way back?’ I had to put that down to his being a sort of jungle boy, but then could one so small be a jungle boy?

Another thought that would come to me was, ‘When Beulah goes off at night is he, in fact, a spy? Is he being met by the Japanese, and are they getting information from him?’

Now that must have been the craziest idea you could imagine, yet one or two of the men voiced a similar suspicion, and then we would roar laughing, look at each other and explode again, cackling away our idiotic suspicions.

I don’t have much more to tell you. When we got near to the forefront of the shore of the Johore Straits—those beautiful silver, shining Straits—the little fellow disappeared. We hunted everywhere for him, but never found him. We were made aware of a swift progress down the Peninsula by the victorious Japanese troops so that we didn’t waste much time getting across the causeway of the Straits and on to Singapore Island. We knew that there we had enormous Naval guns which would blow the guts out of the Japanese Army, as soon as they could be turned from pointing seaward to pointing north to Johore Bahru. Alas, that never happened.

In the hurry and the bustle we finally forgot the little fellow we had so much loved. We had no time to talk about such things. We worked day and night without sleep. I think I tallied up fourteen days on the Peninsula and on Singapore Island when we had no sleep. The Japanese settled into the northern side of the Johore Straits and proceeded to ply us with about a quarter of a million artillery shells in one day onto the part of the Island where we were based, facing them. So thoughts of a small child, or a dwarf, or whatever he may have been, were dumped in favour of evading explosions.

It had been in the months of January and February that we travelled from Mersing on the East Coast on to Singapore Island where we established ourselves. My BSA was flat out all the time, but then all of that constitutes another story. To be honest I have told it more than once in my already published short stories and novels.

Now, back to Beulah. Who was the little fellow? What was he? Was he a brilliant dwarf who could feign being a young—a very young—child or was he just what he appeared to be, not much more than a toddling baby and the victim of a dreadful war in which he became an orphan? Why was he there with us? Was he, in fact, a brilliant prodigy, a play actor with us and a trained spy for the Japanese?

Ask me my opinion and I will tell you one day that I am sure he was what he appeared to be, an extraordinary child, able to look after himself, to use us and our affection, and so nothing more and nothing less than just that. On another day I will say he was a brilliant little creature who must have been a dwarf and yet not an innocent one but a very intelligent one, and without doubt a spy. The normal evidence which stares us in the face as to his size and his age belies the charge that he could ever have been a spy.

Yet, down in my gut, that is down in the depths of me, I cannot but believe he was a clever spy, that he passed on information, even by our own lines of communication in some very clever way. Nothing of that intelligence ever seemed to harm us, but it is now known that—long before the War—the Japanese had laid down a brilliant network of espionage. This was before they had ever entered the country as an army. A woman told me, many years after the end of the war, that her uncle had been in Malaya when he discovered by a series of accidents that close by every postal office there lived a Japanese family. He told the authorities about his discovery and they shook their heads. ‘Too fanciful!’ was their conclusion. Although only in his early thirties, and apparently a healthy man, he died a few days later from a sudden heart attack. My informant was sure he had been administered a drug which brought on the attack.

One of our close friends in Mersing was a tall, handsome Chinese vendor of a drinks stall. He was so pleasant, and so vocally anti-Japanese, that we often talked to him about our work. He was later found to be a Japanese spy who had been spying for years, and at this very moment of writing as I recall this man, I am sure that Beulah was part of his espionage system.

Tomorrow you may find me shaking my head and denying that Beulah could ever have been a spy. I will see him just as a little fellow, quite intelligent but as innocent as the babe we believed he was. Well, as the baby he almost was.

And I swear that what I am writing is just as I saw it in the weeks he was with us. This is not a story intended to tease: it is true. I don't know the answer, and short of death I know I never will. What I wonder is why my mates and I have never since those days exchanged our ideas about Beulah. You will say that I dreamed it, or they dreamed it up—that we all dreamed it up. No: it is as I saw it was, but perhaps not to have the answer to every mystery is good for us. It keeps us from pride and that sort of thing. It keeps us ever intrigued.

Just one last thought which has only, at this moment, come to me. Was Beulah indeed a spy, but did he come to love us so much that far from giving authentic news to the Japanese he gave them false information and somehow saved us from being destroyed? Now that could easily have been the case. I am positive that as much as I loved the little fellow, so he loved me, loved Bobby and all the boys.

Pardon me if this end is unsatisfactory. All I can give to you is a vagrant thought about a vagrant boy, or babe, or whatever he was.