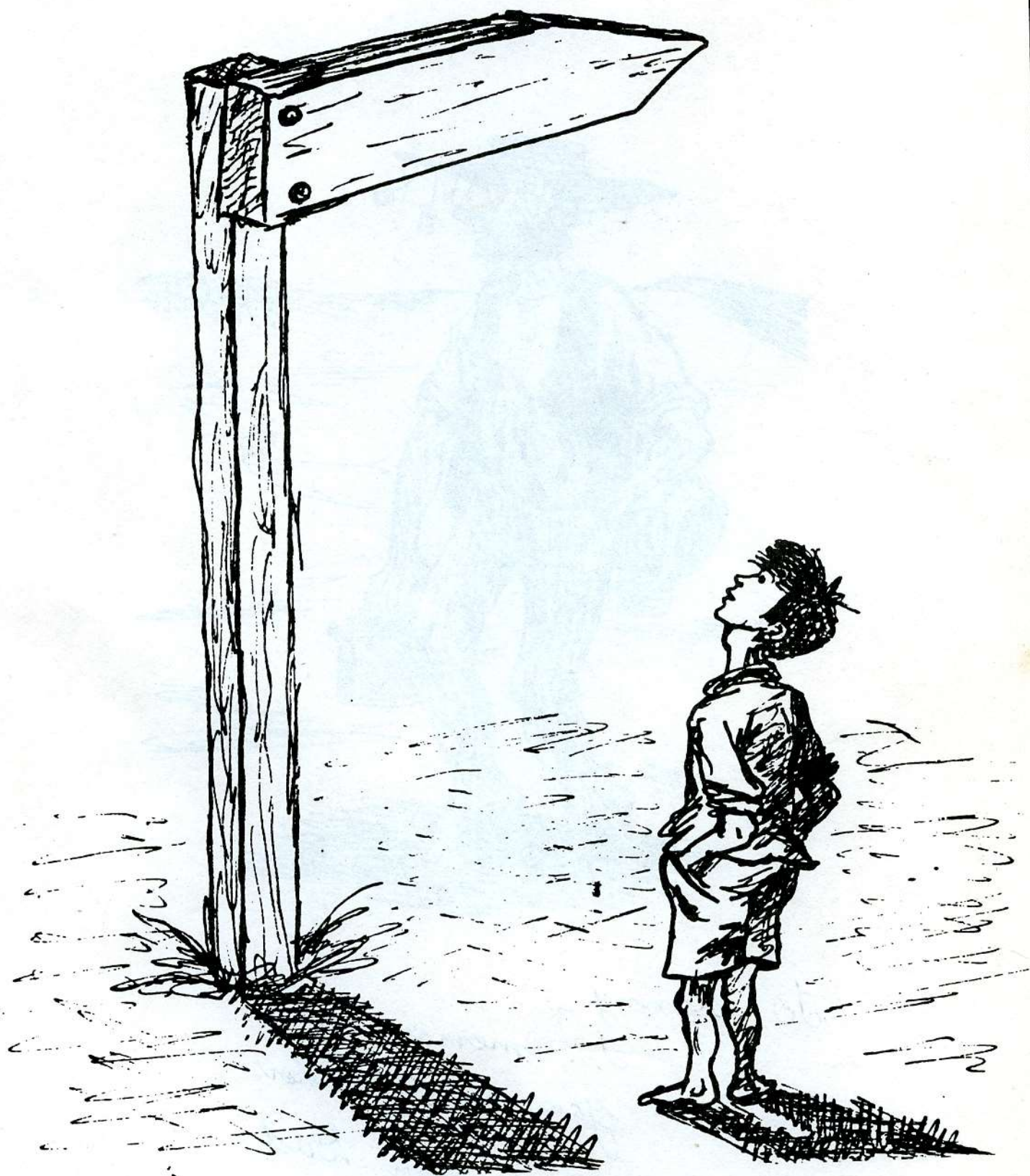


Gold in the Morning Sun



by Jim Whitham

Illustrated by Rodney Whitham



Chapter 1

Which Way

It has always been a source of wonder to me why some children are brought into this world when they are not wanted, become neglected and as they grow up are ignored.

This story is about such a child who enters the world in confusion, and who, which ever way he turns, finds he is not alone. There are many more like him, all trying to break through the darkness, and when on entering the light, finds no signposts to show them the way. This is the time in a child's life when parent's guidance is essential and should be forthcoming. Without it how can he know which road to travel or what he will find at the end of the journey?

I was born in Melbourne in 1917, the last year of the First World War. My Grandparents, my Uncle and my Mother came to Australia from South Wales (Great Britain) before the war, and they, like their parents before them were all coal miners. They had led a very meagre and hard life as was the "lot" of miners those days and like many others had listened to the rumours that in Australia, gold could be picked up in the streets. They soon found out the truth, and eventually found work in the quarries where the stone was crushed to pave the roads. Grandpa worked as a powder-monkey, in other words, he was the person responsible for the handling and storage of the explosives. During the day he used to climb down the face of the quarry on a rope and fill all the holes drilled there earlier for that purpose with explosives and attach the fuses. Later when night came and work in the quarry had finished, he would light all the fuses and blow down enough stone for the next day's work. My Uncle was his assistant who checked all the safety rules laid down for this work, which meant seeing that the explosives were kept dry and securely locked away, checking that the rope to be used was in good order and properly anchored, etc.

My earliest memory is of being in Tasmania with Grandma. She was working in a canning factory that preserved fruit for export and she would take me with her to work. The bottom floor was where the fruit was peeled, sliced and cored. Granny worked on the second storey and had to climb a ladder to get there. There the fruit was sorted on an elevator and the good fruit was taken off and put on another elevator to be taken to the floor above to be tinned and packed. I would stand as long as I could watching Granny and the elevator working and when I got too tired or bored, I would curl up on some old sack in the corner and go to sleep. When work was finished I would be taken to the boarding house where we stayed, have supper and then be allowed to play for a while in front of the log fire. We had a small room and Granny and I slept in a large bed together. Under the bed was a large box filled with cigarette and tobacco tins of all shapes and sizes and with these I could dream up all sorts of things to make such as castles, trains and houses. These were the only play things I ever had all through my childhood. It appears that Granny and I went there for the fruit picking season when the quarries were idle, while the two men stayed at home so as not to lose their jobs when work started up again. When they did start, we returned home, minus the tins which belonged to the owner of the house where we stayed. We lived in a place that was 2 miles from a country town about 45 miles from Melbourne. The house was on a small plot of land where there was a vegetable garden and an area that was used to graze Grandpa's two horses. They were let out of the stable during the day and put back in before dark. He loved those horses very much and used to take pride in their appearance.

He also looked after the buggy very well, but apart from this, he seemed to have no time for anything else, except his work. Grandpa was a very stern and hard man and whatever he said was law. He demanded obedience from all of us and although he was not a religious man and never went to Church, grace had to be said before meals, and prayers before bed. He would not tolerate a lie under any circumstances, nor did I ever hear him swear.

If he did catch somebody lying he would never forgive them. This went for Uncle and Granny too. Grandpa tolerated me as long as I kept out of his way and kept my mouth closed at all times. He used to stare at me sometimes in a way that seemed to say that I should crawl back into the woodwork where I came from. He was a man to be feared, especially when he lost his temper.

Grandpa, my Uncle and my Mother, whom at this time I did not know, were all heavy drinkers. Granny in her own words said "I never touch the vile stuff." Fortunately the two men could drink and lot and never show it. They liked to gamble, too, as well as play the horses on Saturday. They would bet on how many flies would settle on the counter at a given time, whose dog would be the first through the door or how many pots would be drunk before closing time. Consequently, the outcome of this was that Granny did not get the housekeeping money till after the pub was closed on Saturday night, which seemed to leave her short of cash to last the week out.

I was about 4 years old when one day two boys came to join us. I found out that they were my brothers; one 2 years older and the other 2 years younger. I was so glad to have someone to play with. Now there were three of us boys in the house. Grandpa put some boards on the washtrough in the washhouse and got three boxes for us to sit on and from then on that is where we had our meals. Apparently he had put up with me at the table before the others came, as long as I opened my mouth only to put food into it and he had treated me as if I wasn't there. Now that there were another two boys in the house, things started to change. We knew that Grandpa wasn't taking all this with good grace, but apparently he couldn't do anything about it except to tolerate us. From that day on, butter and other things that I used to have at the adult's table disappeared from the menu. When we were washed and sitting down for breakfast after saying grace, we were given two slices of bread and dripping; for dinner, two slices of bread and jam and, for supper, any of the leftovers. Candy or chocolate we never saw except in shop windows. We were given to understand that they were for rich people and we were not to ask for them. I learned from my elder brother that we had a step-father who had come from a different part of Wales. He was also a miner and doing the same job as Grandpa in a quarry outside of Melbourne.

When I was five years old it was time for me to start school. My older brother had been attending for a year or so and was used to walking the two miles but it made me very tired. Going to school was okay but it was whilst coming home that my legs gave out. We were always late getting home as I used to stop a lot to rest and my poor brother was always getting into trouble for letting me dawdle along. He had chores to do when he got home and had to have done before supper time.

This was a time in my life where my real troubles started. Right from the beginning I did not like school. Sitting for hours at a desk was boring and while the rest of the class was learning I would be day-dreaming. I found it difficult to absorb what was being taught so I quickly became the dunce of the class. For the life of me, I could not remember what the teacher had said five minutes before. I was getting kept in after school to write something 20 or 30 times for not listening or taking notice of what was being taught.



"GRANDPA"

To make matters worse, no-one could read what I had written so it was not long before the other kids nicknamed me "cabbage-head" and wouldn't let me join in their games. I also noticed that I was never included in any of their teams at sport. Actually they shunned me as if I was a freak and I was getting a very bad complex. By now my younger brother had started school and seemed to be getting along alright and the older brother was getting very good marks.

One day when we were walking to school I tagged behind and when they had disappeared around the bend in the road, I crawled through the fence and crossed the paddock down to the river. All that day I walked along by the river day-dreaming. When I came to a place where bamboo was growing, I broke off a good long piece and hid it in the undergrowth as this would make a good fishing rod.

I knew that I would be able to get a hook from Uncle's fishing tackle which he kept on the verandah of the house, and he would not miss a bit of line. Worms, I knew, were plentiful in Granny's vegetable garden, so this was the beginning of a long period of playing truant from school. I would leave my brothers on the way to school and head for the river to spend the day fishing. When I heard the school bell I would head for the road to meet my brothers on their way home. The days I used to miss were the ones when they had Grammar and History lessons. These were the two subjects I hated most. Surprisingly enough, the teachers did not seem to take any notice of my absence. Perhaps their classes went more smoothly when I was not there, but like all good things, there had to be an end.

It came with a summons to my Grandparents to see the Headmaster at school. As a result of that meeting I got a good thrashing from my Grandpa with the buggy whip and now I knew how the horses felt when he laid into them. Needless to say, I behaved myself for some time after that, even though attending school did not help me much. My head was still full of cotton wool and I was getting more bullied around by the boys and shunned by the girls. I knew I had no place with them. The urge to go to the river grew stronger and I dreamed of the few fish that I had caught and of all those that I had not. When I did catch one I would gently take it off the hook and throw it back into the river again. It gave me the feeling that I was saving a life. Another sport I liked was chasing rabbits, but I don't remember how many times I had my hands on one and had to let it go after being scratched by their very sharp claws.

After a while, the urge to be with the rabbits and the fish was so great that I started sneaking away to the river again, but after a few absences the headmaster made my brothers tell him where I was. He got the Truant Officer on my tail, who when he caught me, broke my fishing rod over his knees, threw it in the river and lugged me back to school. There I got a "dressing-down" from the headmaster and was given one last chance to settle down to try and learn something.

Chapter 2

My Egg Collection

By now I was nearly ten years old. I had been kept back a class at the end of the last year at school. I stuck out like a sore thumb as I was a year older than my classmates and being tall and thin, I seemed to be a source of embarrassment to my classmates. Anyway, I tried hard for a few months to be a good pupil.

One morning a lady came to the school to tell us that we had to go with her to a house in town. With the headmaster's permission, we three boys accompanied this lady to one of the finest houses I had ever seen. We were told to wait outside as another lady wanted to see us. We did not know what was happening and were a bit scared of the place - real posh it was. Sometime later the door opened and a middle-aged woman appeared. We could see that she was a really important person but she did not look like someone who ate little boys for lunch, so we relaxed a bit.

She asked us many questions. What did we have for lunch at school, and breakfast? How often we changed our socks, did we wear underwear? She also inspected our clothes and wasn't happy to see my older brother with the backside out of his pants. After this inspection, she called to someone in the house. Out came the lady who had picked us up from school, wearing a maid's uniform this time. Shortly afterwards she ducked back into the house and reappeared with some fruit for us. We were given a letter for Grandma and told to come to this house every Monday morning before school so our clothes, our school lunch and our cleanliness could be checked. Soon we lost our fear of the house and the tall, kindly lady who always gave us fruit. We began to look forward to Monday mornings. The outcome of these visits and the letters we took home was an improvement in our food, with more to eat, our old clothes were patched, buttons replaced and we had to be very clean before going to school. But after coming home from school things were just the same as before.

It was slowly dawning on us that things were not as they appeared. We found out that when I was a baby the neighbours had complained to the welfare authorities that I was being neglected by my parents. They went to Court to have me taken away. I became a Ward of the State and was farmed out to Grandma to bring me up. A few years later, my step-father told the welfare authorities that he couldn't afford to feed my two brothers even though he had a good job in the quarries. They were also made State Wards and sent to Grandma's care. This we learned over a period of time from the "fruit lady" as we came to call her.

Each Christmas time when school was in recess Granny would take the three of us to Melbourne. This was an event beyond our dreams. It took one and a half hours to travel the 45 miles by steam train. We were fascinated by the trip and pushed each other to get a seat near the window. When we reached Melbourne we were awed by the size of it all. We would be taken to some of the big stores, ushered quickly past the toy and sweet departments and down to the bargain basements which could be found in most stores at that time. There they sold goods which were called "seconds"; bulk lots from bankrupt factories; soiled items and anything else that could be purchased at a cheap price and sold at half price. Here we were all fitted out with new clothes and footwear for the coming year. Next we were marched along to the stationery department with our lists of school book requirements. Afterwards we had a cup of tea and an oversweet cake (which we didn't like) and bustled back to the Railway Station for the journey home.

I think that we were pushed along so quickly past the shop windows as Granny was afraid we might ask for something. She appeared to have plenty of money on these shopping trips but at other times there didn't seem to be enough money for food. We later learnt from the "fruit lady" that our Grandparents were receiving an allowance from the State Department of Welfare for our schooling, clothes and upkeep, and that they were not satisfied that all the money was being spent for that purpose.

That was the reason for the weekly inspections. The authorities were satisfied after our appearance and food improved so there was no reason for any more Monday morning rituals and things went along smoothly.

During this period I attended school regularly as I was afraid to step out of line and disappoint the "fruit lady" whom I had come to like very much. I was learning practically nothing going to school, spending most of my time dreaming of fishing. I was excluded from the playground groups of children, and none of them wanted me in any of the sport's teams. In other words, they wished that I would get lost. My Grandparents seemed pleased that I was not giving them too much trouble and even Grandpa's evil eye was not so often seen when he looked at me. But this calm was not to last. The trouble began when one of the boys at school consented to show me his collection of bird's eggs which I had heard so much about. I was so fascinated with them that I decided to begin a collection of my own and even try to get more variety than this boy had. So once more I began to play truant a couple of times each week.

The "fruit lady" did not seem interested in us anymore and we no longer had to visit her house so I had a clear conscience and the Truant Officer had not been seen around for some time. Some of the birds' nests could be found near the ground, others in bushes or in high rocky places but most were in trees. Often birds hid them, others, especially the magpies, built nests in forks of the high limbs of trees. These were the most vicious if they caught you near their nest. I remember once as I was almost at the top of a tree within reach of a nest when I heard a whirr and screech. I looked up to see an old mother magpie headed straight for me like a dive bomber. I let one hand go of the limb to cover my eyes, lost my balance and fell off, hitting the lower branches which fortunately cushioned my fall to the ground. There were still quite a number of scratches all over me, some of which started to bleed and some minor rips in my shirt.

When I got home I expected to get my hide tanned but when asked about it, I said that I had been chasing a rabbit and fell into a bush. The only punishment was to be called all kinds of an idiot. That was one of the rare times that I got away with a lie. Usually when Grandpa asked for the truth he stared me hard in the eye, and it would make me quiver and give myself away. Often he would ask me straight out if he was suspicious of me, at other times he would ask my brothers if I had gone all the way to school. They would tell him the truth for even though they respected him, they also feared him. I didn't blame them for it, if I was the culprit, I had to take my punishment and not them. I loved my brothers very much as they were the only ones I could talk to. I thought that they were just the "cat's whiskers", in other words, the best. We got along very well together. They overlooked the fact that most people thought I was missing some of my marbles on top.

Getting back to my lovely vision of an egg collection, it was not a big problem to climb trees to get eggs as long as you kept a good eye out for the mother birds who would get quite upset at seeing their egg supply disappearing before their eyes. Also it was wise to take a careful look into the nest before putting your hand in. An abandoned nest could house unwanted tenants such as spiders or bats. The biggest problem was getting the eggs down out of the tree and home safely without breaking them.

I solved this problem by tying a string around my pants and putting the eggs in my shirt but I had to be careful not to lean against anything, as I would have a sticky mess to explain when I got home. At home I would make a hole in each end of the egg and blow all the inside yolk out of it. The eggs were kept in a jam tin behind the chook house, but fearing they would get broken I looked around for a safer spot and decided on a beam high in the roof of the stable. I was afraid that Grandpa might see the tin and look inside to see what was there so I brought home an old nest, put my eggs in it and placed it on the beam. This led to events that changed our lives.

We boys returned home from school at 4.15 pm and Grandpa and Uncle arrived home from work at 5.30 pm. This gave us a little time to get our chores done and have time to ourselves.

One Friday night I had a couple of eggs to add to my collection but I forgot that Friday was payday at the quarries and the horses were put into the stable when Grandpa came home for lunch instead of after work as usual. This gave him a good start to get to the pub after work and before closing time.

It was getting dark when I opened the stable door and I did not notice the horses there. When they saw me, they got a fright, backed out of their stalls, knocked the door open and went off down the paddock. As the stable was out of bounds to us boys, I knew I was in trouble and went and hid under the house, but as the house was not built close to the ground I was easily found when they came looking for me with the lantern. I was dragged out from my hiding place by the ankles. Grandpa was furious because he could not get into town and the pub in time and gave me a terrific hiding. My Uncle tried to interfere on my behalf but was pushed aside for his pains and I was sent straight to bed without any supper. When I removed my pants I had stripes on my backside like a zebra and had to stand up next day to eat meals. On the following Monday morning we were told to get scrubbed up and put on clean clothes as we were going into town. Apparently we were not going to school but were left wondering what was going to happen next. We all got into the buggy and Grandpa, who had not spoken a word to us, drove us to the Welfare Office. There he was taken inside while we boys were asked to wait.

There was a lot of shouting mainly from Grandpa, then I was called in and asked to remove my clothes in the next room where a man was waiting. He examined me, told me to dress and wait outside, then we all went home. We found out afterwards that one of the neighbours had reported what had happened to me and filed a complaint.

During the coming week we attended school until one day we were told that the next morning we were to gather our clothes together and make them into a bundle so that we could carry them. We were driven to the Railway Station by Grandpa and there met by the man from the Welfare Office who had tickets for us to travel to Melbourne. I did not enjoy that journey as the suspense of not knowing what was to happen to us spoiled the novelty of the train trip.



Chapter 3

Hard Times

At last we arrived in Melbourne. We were immediately taken to a Court House and brought into a room where a Judge and several men and women were sitting. Apparently they were waiting for us and upon our arrival got right down to business. My elder brother pointed out the lady who was our Mother. She looked like a younger version of Granny. After a lot of talking and signing of papers we were informed that we were now back in our Mother's care. There was no open-arm welcome. We were only told to hurry as we boarded a tram out to one of the suburbs to get home before Ted arrived. We understood that he was our stepfather as we were asked to call him "Uncle" Ted.

The place which we arrived at was not very appealing. The house looked drab; paint was peeling off the walls, the streets were dirty and the surrounding buildings grimy. This area was known to be the last rung on the social ladder. Inside, the house was no better. It looked as if it hadn't been painted for centuries. Old gas lights which we were told did not work, were hanging at weird angles. There were dirty, naked electric light globes in each room. The room Mother showed us into was so tiny, it was barely big enough for the broken double bed which stood in the middle. Here we would sleep in a room with no cupboards, very little space in which to stand to get dressed and no light so we had to leave the door open to let light in from the passage-way.

Our few clothes were placed in boxes under the bed. I could see that I was not going to like this place at all. The bad smells from the street were so different from the clean country air we had left behind that morning. This was not the Melbourne with the bright stores we remembered from our annual shopping trips. I think that it was at this time that I resolved that if I ever got away, I would never live in a city again, and I never have. This is only half of the coin, as there are quite a lot of beautiful Melbourne suburbs of which I was quite unaware of at the time.

During the first week we never ventured outside the house after dark. The bright, flowery dress Mother had worn to Court disappeared once we were home and she changed into a faded, black dress. This was all we ever saw her wear. The bright dress must have been borrowed for the Court appearance. We realised that there wasn't going to be any motherly love wasted on us "brats" as Uncle Ted usually called us. Mother had got rid of us for eight years when we needed her most and now we were brought home as if we belonged to a stranger.

Our first impression of Uncle Ted, when we finally came face to face with him, was not very good and it soured as time went on. Our home coming would have been just as hard on him and mother as on ourselves. There had been no kids about, but suddenly they had three extra mouths to feed and kids to look after when they didn't want any. At least we were old enough to look after ourselves once we found our feet. Uncle Ted was a man of medium height, thin and tough as nails. He gave us to understand that HE wore the trousers and we must never forget it! In the First World War he had been in the army and wounded at Anzac Cove at Gallipoli. The bullet that he had received in the head was still there as it was too dangerous to remove and the hole was covered with a silver plate that looked like he was wearing a medal. This wound affected him badly when he had a lot to drink and even though mother seemed to be able to handle him, we kept out of his way at these times. He told us that he was only working part-time so we would have to "pull up our socks" from now on and find jobs before and after school to buy food to add to the usually empty larder.

The years of 1927-28 were the beginning of the Depression that hit Australia as well as other countries around the world. People were being stood down from work and others were working part-time in every kind of job. Banks were closing, businesses, shops and factories were going bankrupt, putting hundreds of people on the labour market.

Long lines of people waited outside employment agencies from early morning till late at night. Many slept on the footpath in order to be first in line the next morning often to find that there were no vacancies and turned away. Those who still held jobs worked harder to keep them as they knew they could easily be replaced if they "got the boot".

Things got so bad that the Federal Government started a scheme to help the unemployed. This scheme, commonly called the "dole" or "bread money" gave the single unemployed fifteen shillings and a married couple thirty shillings each week. Everyone was required to work two days per week for this dole. People were formed into gangs and taken off to work on building or replacing roads and footpaths; cleaning up parks and gardens; planting trees and lawns; cleaning out rivers and river banks; actually anything that Councils could find for them to do. Melbourne got a real facelift during those times. The only people who seemed to do well during the depression were the Publicans and Bookmakers. It didn't matter how poor people were, they somehow found threepence for a glass of beer and sixpence for a bet on the horses on Saturday.

Two other businesses that were able to keep their doors open during those times were Pawnshops and Second-hand Shops. Many people were forced to sell off clothing, jewellery and personal articles to make ends meet, while others pawned what they did have left for a few shillings, hoping that one day they could pay back the money plus interest. Every street had a pawnshop or "uncle" and one main street had quite a few. In their windows could be seen jewellery, sports goods, musical instruments, personal clothing, cameras, binoculars, watches and even war medals. I don't know whether there are any "uncles" left now as they were a part of the past. They were very hard times when people never had enough warm clothes in the winter, enough food in their stomachs or had to be evicted from their homes when they couldn't afford the rent.

We were awakened the first morning in our new home at 7 am by the sound of tinkling bells. We were up and dressed like a shot, falling over each other in an effort to get outside to see what it was. The sight would delight any child - coming down the street was a lorry pulled by two Clydesdale horses, beautifully groomed, their tails and manes plaited with ribbons, the harness decorated with polished brassware and bells tinkling. The brightly painted and decorated lorry was loaded with wooden barrels. What looked like a circus was actually the work teams delivering barrels of beer to the pubs around the suburbs. The lorries, about ten of them, came down the street at five minute intervals. We discovered that they came from the brewery at the end of our street. These teams were the pride of Melbourne and people must have worked all night to prepare them for the morning's parade. The bad smell of fermenting hops and malt from the brewery was well worth putting up with to see this grand parade any morning we were home at that hour.

After a week at home, mother took us to be enrolled at school. We were amazed at the size of it. Instead of a few groups of kids, there seemed to be one huge mass that we had to push our way through to get to the door. We finally entered and handed our Report Cards to the teachers. I don't know what they thought of mine but my only concern was, how could I escape from this jungle of people? Once again I was put into a lower grade and was glad that these children did not know my nickname.

We started to look around for a job and I was the first one to be successful. I found a job in the vegetable section of the Victoria Street Markets not far from home. I worked for a stall holder who would send me to fetch more supplies of vegetables with a hand truck when he needed them. The stall holders pitched in together and if one ran out they got supplies from another who had plenty. In that way, they helped one another to sell stock and didn't need to turn a customer away. I liked the job very much and was paid three shillings for working from 4.30 am to 7.30 am five mornings each week.

Henry, my older brother, delivered newspapers from door to door starting at 4 am each morning. He didn't particularly like his job as he had many grouchy customers who waited for the early papers to look at the "situations vacant" columns for a job. They would sometimes have to leave early and travel many miles on foot to try out for a job. Eddie, my younger brother, was too young to get a morning job but he was able to work in a grocery shop after school weighing flour and sugar, etc. into paper bags and restocking shelves. He was lucky he didn't have to get up early each morning like we did.

Friday night was payday at the quarries so mother would leave home early to meet Uncle Ted when he finished work and go on to their usual haunt. Most people patronized just the one place and by doing this, it was easier for them to get beer after hours. Once they became known, they were allowed in the back way. On Sundays we kids were sent on this errand with a half gallon glass bottle. The drill was to keep an eye open for policemen; when the coast was clear, to go around to the back door of the pub and knock. When we were asked, "Who is it?" we were to give my mother's name. The door would open a little to pass in the bottle which was in a sack with the money. The door would close and a little while later open again and the sack containing the full bottle would be passed out to us. We still had to be careful that we did not get caught on the way home.

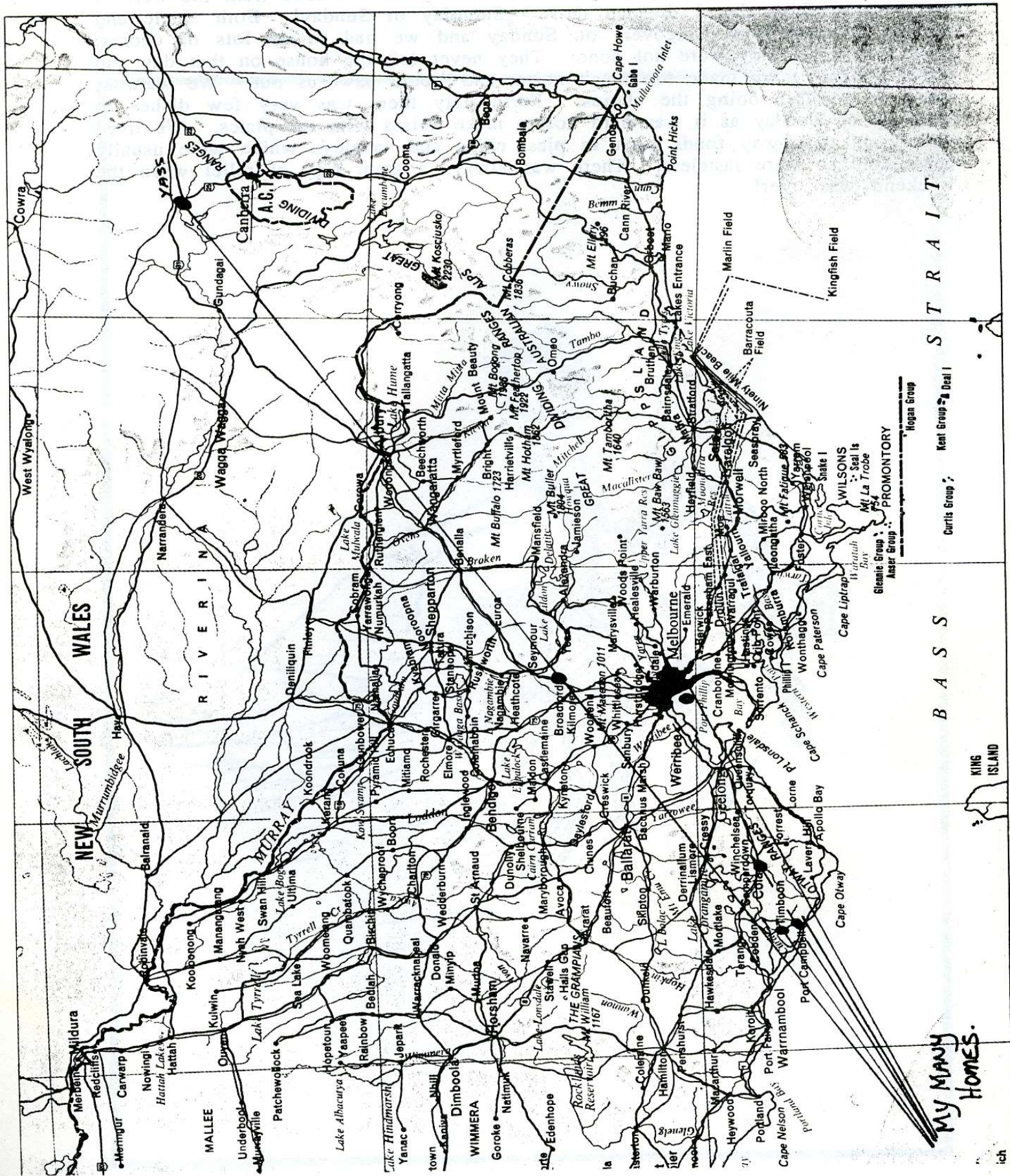
We had to fend for ourselves on Friday nights as there was nobody home and usually nothing left out for us to eat and we dare not touch anything unless it was put on the table for us. On these nights I had a job selling newspapers on one of the busy street corners. I had a "possie" all to myself which had been allotted to me. I was given 24 papers by the newsagent and some change. Each paper sold for one and a half pence each and earnt me one farthing each. It was not hard to sell 24 copies but unfortunately this was all I was able to carry. On Friday night the shops were open till 9 pm and the streets were full. The paper contained the racing page for Saturday and people also liked to have something to read on Sunday. I always took my brother, Eddie, with me as he was able to handle the change much better than I could and I would hand out the papers. After we ran out we would collect the sixpence we had earned and often Eddie would have a couple of halfpennies in his pocket from tips. Off we would go to the nearest fish shop and for sixpence buy a large piece of fish and as many chips as we could eat. That night we dined like kings! Henry would walk up and down the street and when he saw someone loaded up with parcels, would carry them home for a couple of pence. He also did well on Friday nights.

All our earnings apart from Friday night's takings had to be handed over to Uncle Ted, who was always accusing us of keeping money back although we never did. Only when we received tips did we dare keep them.

We did not have much trouble at home during the week as we went to bed early so as to be up and away at 4 am to be at work on time. Eddie was lucky as he used to stay in bed till 7 am to get up when he liked and see the horses pass. At the weekends we would run foul of Uncle Ted. On Saturday he only worked half a day then he would drink a lot and get into fits of temper.



He wore an army belt we got to know very well, a relic from the war. I don't know which day I dreaded most - Saturday or Sunday! Both Uncle and Mother suffered from hangovers on Sunday and we had to do lots of chores. Lord help us if they were not done. They never left the house on that day and were irritable if we made too much noise, and would bawl us out. We were as quiet as possible doing the chores. Fortunately there was very few dishes to wash up on Sunday as it was hard not to make noises with the plates. We lived mainly on take-away foods such as pies, chips and saveloys which were usually eaten cold so were tasteless. There was always a great sigh of relief when the weekend was over!



STRAIT

BASS

KING ISLAND

MY MANY HOMES.

Curtis Group ; Kent Group ; Deal I

Stennie Group ; Alister Group ; PROMONTORY

Hogan Group

Kingfish Field

Marlin Field

Point Hicks

Gondola

Cape Howe

Cape I

Point Hicks

Point Hicks

Point Hicks

Chapter 4

Goldfishing

At school my brothers were doing really well and getting along very well with other children. But my head was still in a fog when it came to school work. Now I started playing truant in a different way than before when I would leave home and not turn up at school at all. The roll was called and I was marked present in the first class of the day so I could walk away during the morning recess, without anyone realising that I was absent. At that time, my favourite places were the parks and gardens, especially one that was close by the school. Other parks were further away and I would love watching the swans in the pond and the gardeners mowing the lawns. Here I could smell the fresh clean air.

One day as I was leaning on the fence, watching the swans swimming around, I noticed that there were also fish swimming around in there. I suddenly had a desire to keep a fish at home, not thinking of what I could keep it in. Next morning I left home with a long pin, some cotton and a crust of bread in an empty tin that I had found. On the way to school I hid the tin in a laneway and at recess I left the schoolground, picked up my tin and headed off to the gardens. I hid in some bushes, bent the pin, tied the cotton onto it and pushed the crust of bread to the point. When nobody was about I climbed over the fence, filled the tin with water and settled down to catch myself one of the beautiful goldfish I could see in the pond. I was so engrossed in trying to hook that fish that I was lost to the world. I realised that I was being watched when a loud bellow from behind me gave me such a fright that I fell into the pond. Luckily it was not very deep and as I crawled out covered in a green, slimy mess the park keeper grabbed me. He dragged me over to a tap and turned the hose onto me to clean me up before he marched me out the gate and down the street. As soon as he saw a policeman he called him over, told him what I had been doing and handed over the cotton and pin as evidence. I was promptly marched off to school soaking wet, where I was hauled before the headmaster. I stood there shivering and dripping water onto the floor, but he was more upset about the fact that I was fouling up his office than what I had done so the policeman took me home.

Upon arrival at home, the policeman repeated the story, asked my mother to take me in hand and told me threateningly what would happen if I left school again. She did not seem to care about the incident and intended to pass the responsibility for punishment over to Uncle Ted. I shut myself in my bedroom and waited for the storm to arrive but nothing happened. When I came out at supper time nothing was said so I assumed that mother was waiting for a more opportune time to spill the beans.

Later that night in bed I talked with my brothers (we all shared the one bed so we could talk without being overheard) about my intention to run away because I was in trouble both at home and at school. Henry wanted to come with me but he did not want to leave Eddie at home on his own. He would have to stay until he was older.



POLICEMANS WIFE

Chapter 5

The Runaway

Eddie was now ten years old, I was twelve and Henry nearly fourteen. I had made a Billy-cart from a wooden soapbox, two baby-carriage wheels I'd found in the rubbish bin and made two wooden handles to push it along. I was very proud of it as this was the first thing I had ever made by myself. It was a great help to me when I had a load to carry and Henry sometimes used it to carry parcels on Friday nights.

Late at night, when everyone was asleep I got some food from the kitchen, took two spare blankets and a few clothes, climbed out of the window, went around to the backyard and loaded everything onto the billy-cart. There were a few bad moments when I opened the squeaky back gate but no-one woke up. Off I went into the night and as I passed through the quiet suburbs I tried to decide what I would do. I decided that if I was asked my age I would say that I was fourteen since it was not unusual for boys of that age to leave school to look for work. I felt that I would be able to get away with it as I was quite tall. I knew that if I was not to starve I would have to find work and this was not so easy to do. The food that I had brought with me wouldn't last very long, perhaps a couple of days if I rationed it out, but the main thing was to get out of the suburbs and as far away as possible before daylight.

I kept going until I was too tired to go any further and arrived at an abandoned old shed on the side of the road. I pushed the door open and took my billy-cart inside as I didn't want anyone to come nosing around. I took out the blankets and rolled up to sleep till late afternoon. On awakening I ate and started off again with as much speed as I could. The glow from the city lights on the skyline haunted me. I felt I never wanted to see it again. I was just approaching a small town when one of the wheels of my billy-cart collapsed. I had to hold the cart up at an angle with one side in the air until I came to a tennis court with a pavillion where some spectators were watching a game. I pulled in there and after finding a tap for a drink and a wash settled down to eat and sleep. About lunchtime the next day I woke up, gathered my belongings together and started walking up the highway. I was sorry to have had to abandon my billy-cart. I should have known that those wheels were made for city footpaths and not country roads.

Sometime in the afternoon I was picked up by a chap driving a big transport truck. He asked me where I was going and the only place I could think of in this direction was Seymour, so I told him that I was going to see some friends there. He seemed quite satisfied. Seymour was about 40 miles further up the road, but he didn't ask me any more questions so I settled down to enjoy the scenery.

The road was lined with trees on both sides and they often met overhead to form an archway. I had missed living in the country so much and had no desire to live in the city again. This was not to be, as I soon discovered that my new-found freedom was going to be short-lived. The driver let me off in the centre of the town and as my meagre food supply was running out, I found a Baker's shop, went in and asked the baker if I could work for any leftovers that he could spare. He asked me to wait so that he could go into the bakehouse to see what was there.

He was gone sometime when a policeman entered the shop and started asking me questions. He asked me to name my friends and when I could not, he asked me to accompany him to the Police Station. Apparently the baker had telephoned the police while he was out of the shop.

The policeman was very kind, talking to me as if we were old friends so I opened up and told him my story. That I was twelve years old, had run away from home and the reason why. He took me through to the back of the police station where his wife was preparing supper and after enjoying a cup of tea and some cake I was invited to join them for supper.

They were so kind to me, I had the nicest meal I could ever remember. After supper the policeman took me to the lock-up out the back and showed me one of the cells where I could sleep. I was given a couple of extra blankets as it was so cold in there and was told that I would be called in time for a wash before breakfast. At my first sight of the policeman in the baker's shop, I had visions of myself in chains but instead I had supper with him, helped his wife wash up the dishes and been talked to in a very fatherly way. Now that I was in a cell he walked away and left the door open. I could have walked out but I felt that he trusted me and I didn't want to cause him any trouble by leaving.

Next morning I was told that a policeman from Melbourne would be coming to return me to my mother. This was what I dreaded the most but while I was waiting, I did some odd jobs for the wife in return for what she had done for me. A couple of hours later a man arrived to collect me. He was not in uniform, no handcuffs nor gun could be seen. I was taken to the Railway Station where he bought me some cakes in a bag and a comic to read during the journey to Melbourne which would take about three hours. He didn't speak to me very much and settled down in a corner to read a book so I was left alone for the trip home to the city. On arrival, he took me home, handed me over to my mother and said to me, "Don't ever try that again".

Policemen played a big part in my life just now. I used to be a bit afraid of them, but after watching them patrolling the streets on Friday nights while I was selling papers, I realised that they were only doing their job. After my experience at Seymour, I knew that they would be helpful to go to if I had a problem. I only had my two male guardians, Grandpa and Uncle Ted to compare them with, but the law came out on top. I had been away only three days, but I missed my brothers very much and found life lonely without them. I mourned the loss of my billy-cart and would have to get to work on another one.

Needless to say I got what punishment I deserved and before Uncle Ted had finished with me, even Eddie and Henry were in tears. He didn't care a damn about my running away and probably wished that I had never come back. He was angry about the food that I had taken from the larder (half a loaf of bread, some jam, a day-old pie and three old saveloys) that was worth about seven pence. That was the crime for which I was punished even though he knew that I would have eaten that amount if I had been at home. The problem was that I had not earned anything in that time to replace the food lost and I had lost four day's wages as well as run the risk of losing my job. They say that every day of our life we learn something. I learnt several things that day. The first was to save all my tips so I would not have to raid the kitchen, the second was to stay away from towns and highways and the third, most importantly, to gain the age of fourteen so I could gain my freedom!

It's strange that the people I liked most; the "fruit lady", the policeman and his wife were representatives of the law and we were on the other side of the fence!

Everything was rosy for a while but a strange thing happened on the way home from school one day. We were stopped by an unknown lady who seemed to be waiting for us. She gave us a note with an address on it and told us that this was our Father's house. She wanted us to visit him as soon as possible, not wait too long and not to tell anyone at home about it.

We never knew her name and never saw her again. We had presumed that our father had died and we didn't know how she knew about us. As this message was so mysterious and urgent and as we were so intrigued by the prospect of an adventure, we set off the following Saturday all spruced up.

Our clothes were none too clean and a bit ragged, but we wore the best we had and set off for a suburb a good five miles walk away. When we found the address, we saw a small, nicely painted home with a path down the side. Flowers grew each side of the path and it looked like a palace; everything was so clean and inviting. We plucked up courage and knocked on the door.

A small old lady was so pleased to see us that she hugged us one by one. We were a bit embarrassed by this as we had never been hugged before. She took us inside the house, which seemed full of delicate things (we had to be careful not to knock anything over). We sat on the sofa and were immediately asked if anyone at home knew that we had come. When we assured her that we had not told anyone, she called us into another room where an old man appeared in a wheelchair. We were shocked to see that he had no hair, his eyes stared straight ahead and he was only skin and bone under his clothes. He could not talk and was completely paralysed. Another chap, who said he was our Uncle arrived and said that he would explain why we had been summoned.

We were told that this man was our father. Years ago, when Eddie was only two months old, he had been badly injured in an accident while working at Allen's Sweet Factory and had been left completely paralysed. Mum had seen him in hospital and had been told by the Doctors that he would never walk again. Mum told them that she could not look after him and that his parents should take care of him. Afterwards she was seen in the company of another man and never came to see Dad again. They asked us to describe Uncle Ted to them, but apparently this was not the same man. The Doctor had suggested that Father be confronted by someone from the past. It might help him recover, as miracles sometimes do. But all the talking they did, telling him that we were his sons did nothing to change father's blank stare. He didn't seem to register anything.

The old lady who had opened the door to us had been father's mother, our grandmother! She gave us plenty to eat and drink, really filling us up. They were very nice people but very old and small. When we left we promised to come again. We returned a month later but father seemed so much worse. At least we knew that he was not alone. We were a bit frightened so we never went again as the ordeal was too much for us.

A few years later I wrote two letters but didn't receive a reply so assumed that they had moved. I never tried to trace them afterwards, as I would have found it hard to explain why we had stopped going to see them.

My teacher began keeping me in after school more often as he thought that this would help me to catch up with the younger kids. I was at least a year older than the rest of the class but I was getting further and further behind in my schoolwork. One Friday afternoon I was kept in at school when normally the teachers wanted to get away early for the weekend. This day I got angry and yelled at the teacher. Needless to say, on Monday morning I was called to the headmaster's office and caned yet again. He gave me to understand that he was taking this matter further as he had had enough of me. He told me that I was a born trouble-maker and that he knew the remedy for this. I tried to explain that I sold papers on Friday nights in order to buy my supper and if I was late I could lose my job, but it made no difference to him.

To make matters worse, the kids were ganging up on me. There were daily fights in and out of school and they came at me in bunches. The result of this was that the school was getting complaints from parents as the other kids didn't always come off best so they went home with tales about me. All this caused the bubble to burst.

I was twelve and a half years old. Six months had passed since I had unsuccessfully tried to leave home. My older brother, Henry, had left school and started work. Mother was summoned to the school to meet with the headmaster, the Truant Officer (whom I had got to know by sight) and some other officials. I was also included in this meeting. At this conference the recommendation was that I be placed in a Reformatory. As I did not know what this was, my mother explained on the way home that it was a home for bad boys.

This brought my world crashing down around my ears! It meant that I would have to bring my plans forward eighteen months! As I had no way of knowing when I would be sent to the Reformatory I decided that I would have to leave straight away. That night we three got into a huddle and Henry said that next morning when Mum was out, he would leave work and come home and put all my things in a bundle for me. He and Eddie gave me what money they had and I promised that I would come back for Eddie when I was able to get work for the both of us. Henry said that he could look after himself now and I thought that it would be best to get Eddie away as soon as possible. So at recess the next morning I walked away from school and when I reached home, collected my things, said goodbye to Henry and headed for the back streets, hoping that I would never see this place again. I had a battered old suitcase and a bundle under my arm - all my worldly possessions but it did not matter. What did matter was that I was free and going into the country again, knowing that this time I would have to make good.

Chapter 6

Waltzing Matilda

I left the suburbs, having bought enough food to last me for three or four days. On the first night I was just clear of the town when I came to a very small dairy farm. I slept against a haystack in the paddock. The night was fine and quite cold but the warmth of the hay got me through that first night okay. Next morning I headed off towards the north as I thought that this would be the best place to get work.

The further north I went the warmer it got if I kept going inland. I walked about twenty miles the next day till I came to an old wooden bridge over a creek. I climbed down the side to see if it was dry underneath and if there was room to sleep but I found it was already occupied. I saw what I thought was an old man sitting on his swag, breaking sticks to start a fire. I turned to climb back up to the road again when he called out to me, saying "there is room for two, I will have the billy boiling in a jiffy".

After debating with myself for a moment, I decided that at least this way I would have company and accepted his offer. I was glad I did, as this night was the beginning of my education, for what I learned from this man stood me in good stead for the next nine years. Many times I remembered his sound advice. When I had a closer look at him, I realized that he was not so old, only about forty, but with his bushy whiskers, long hair and baggy clothes, he looked older. Between us we made a meal with what he had.

When we had eaten tea and after he had his pipe going he asked me about myself so I told him my story. He then told me that when he returned to Sydney from the war he could not settle down at any job he tried so he took to the country. He had been carrying his swag for ten years but because he was much older and had had army training, he found it much easier than I was going to. Just now he was heading for the Dandenong strawberry gardens and as the picking was due to start for three weeks, he had decided to stay here a week. He would be glad of my company and as he was very wise in the ways of the road, I would learn a lot from him.

He told me that I had to be able to make a "swag" as this was essential and I would be able to carry three times what I had in my suitcase and bundle. I would be able to walk all day with little effort and still feel comfortable.

You made a "swag" by spreading out your blankets on the ground; in the centre near one end you laid all your spare clothes and a calico bag containing soap, mirror, comb and shaving gear, needle and cotton, buttons, etc., snake bite outfit, medicine and any books or other personal things. This bag was tied at the top and put amongst the clothes, then the sides of the blankets were folded in and the lot rolled tight to form a thick, fat sausage. Around this was wrapped a piece of canvas tent fly, or ground sheet to keep everything dry in the wettest weather.

This roll was held together with a strap at each end. In a sugar bag called a "tucker bag", you kept bread, jam, meat, sugar, tea and salt as well as any other food. It was tied at the top with a piece of rope which was attached to the strap of the swag. Then the swag was laid across the back and the tucker bag hung down on the chest. In addition to this gear, you needed a "billy", (for boiling water to make tea) which was tied to the bottom strap and a water bag carried in one hand leaving the other free for carrying anything else. I did not have all these essential things but I gradually added to them whenever I had the chance.

In the winter, newspaper was necessary to use for laying on the ground and between the blankets to keep warm and in summer, a fly "net" was a must to protect the face against flies and insects. This "fly net" was made by collecting corks found in wine bottles behind any pub, threading them on cotton and attaching them to the brim of your hat making sure that they hung level with the chin. The corks bobbed about when you walked along and therefore stopped the flies from settling on your face.

My companion told me that a farmer never minded if you took food from his paddock if you obeyed the rule of never taking more than you could eat and not destroying the plants or trees. For example, if you came to a field of potatoes, you do what is called "bandicooting". That is, digging down with your hands, close to the plant, pull one potato off and cover in the hole, go to the next plant and do the same till you have enough. This way the plant keeps growing. If you go to a house for a handout, first ask if there is anything you can do for it, and if given a job, do it with good grace whatever it may be. If allotted a certain amount to do, do it, as you never know when you may have to come this way again. Always be clean, it doesn't matter if your clothes are old and torn, people don't like having somebody dirty around the house.

He also told me to stick to the country because that is where the seasonal work and odd jobs are to be found and not to be too proud. Take anything that is offered, do it well and this will be your recommendation. Play fair with them and you will be treated right. A few other very useful things he told me were - always sleep against a fence as cattle never go close to a fence at night; a tree on the road makes a good shelter and windbreak and protects you from the cold, but in a paddock, keep away from trees as cattle gather around them during the night if it starts to rain or becomes windy, you could be trampled on while sleeping; always carry about six yards of rope and lay it on the ground around where you are sleeping as snakes and scorpions will not cross a rope. These and many other things he told me. We stayed together nearly a week and when he was about to move off, I said that I would like to go with him but he said, "No, wait till you are older and stronger, as picking strawberries ten hours a day is back-breaking work", so we parted then and I felt better prepared to face the world.

I headed north again and had to pass through Seymour once more to get to the back roads and beyond, so I camped well on the other side the following evening as I remembered what had happened here last time. I turned off the road at a place called Nagambie and a few miles further on came to a farm and decided to try my luck.

I asked the farmer if he had any odd jobs and he said yes, he would put me on for three weeks for my tucker plus five shillings each week as all his experienced men were busy harvesting and he needed someone to do the odd jobs and work in the milking shed. The homestead was occupied by the farmer and his wife while sharefarmers, their teenage daughter and son occupied a small cottage. The sharefarmer's wife cooked for all of the six hands who worked on the farm. I was to eat in the cottage with the others and sleep in the milking shed where I found a good spot on the hay. At 4.30 am I was woken up and told to take the lantern, go to the paddock and drive the hundred cows back to the shed. Almost a hundred pigs were fed on the skim milk. By the time I returned with the cows all the milkers were already there with sandwiches and a hot billy of tea. There were twelve stalls for the cows and six milkers. My job was to keep the feed up to the cows, let the cows in and out, carry out the full buckets of milk into the big drum container and wash the buckets before returning them to the stalls. Two buckets hung in front of each stall but I was kept running for the next three hours emptying and replacing the buckets as well as looking after the cows.

After I had returned the cows to the paddock we were called for breakfast. After eating I was sent back to the yards to clean up the stalls and get the feed ready for the afternoon milking.

I found out that the sharefarmer's family were Irish, full of laughter and fond of leg-pulling. The eighteen year old daughter worked in the dairy separating the milk and cleaning up as well as helping me to feed the pigs. She said to me "Boy," (she always called me that) "if you are going to work on farms, you will have to learn what it is all about." She said, "God gave the cow an udder to hold the milk and four teats to milk by. Now why would He give it four teats?" I didn't know so she said "When I separate the milk, I have more milk than cream, so three are for milk and one for the cream." So I asked "Why is it milked into one bucket and then have to be separated?" She answered "It's quicker that way as I would have to handle twice as many buckets to empty and wash and I wouldn't be able to keep up with the milkers. Isn't that common sense?" It still didn't make sense to me. This was the start of much leg-pulling that I had to take from her during the three weeks. I didn't mind as they were a nice family and treated me very well. After I had finished feeding the pigs, I cut wood and did odd jobs for the farmer's wife at the big house till lunchtime.

I was given a couple of hours rest period after lunch when I was free to do as I wished before milking time. I was so tired at 8 pm when work finished that I went straight to sleep on the hay. For the first couple of days I was too tired to undress but later got used to the work and long hours. The hay was far more comfortable than all the beds I had slept in till that time.

This routine continued for three weeks till the harvest was finished. As it was only two days before Christmas, the sharefarmer's family invited me to stay and spend it with them. The farmer's wife saw that my boots were worn out so she gave me a new pair for looking after her garden so well and they were to be a Christmas present. This made the farmer very angry as he told her that I had been paid, the boots were not in the contract. He said that she should take them back but she refused to do so. He also wanted to know why I was still there when I had been paid off, but he took on the wrong person when he took on an Irishman. His daughter informed me that the farmer regretted having to pay me the five shillings wages but he had been worried that I might turn the job down. He had been desperate to start the harvest as it was already late. Because there were no unions for children, they could pay what they liked and make you work as long as they wished, but I was fed very well and I really enjoyed working with the sharefarmer's family. They made light of everything that they had to do.

With the money I had earned I bought a few essentials to add to my swag, bought enough food to keep me going for a couple of weeks and headed off along the road again. Perhaps here I should break off from my story and explain a "swagman" to you.

There were two distinct types who carried their swag and three other types who travelled by different means. First there was the traditional swagman, the "sundowner". He was a person who had spent nearly all his life on the roads and some of them were very old. They kept entirely to themselves, never accepting a lift from anyone, just kept walking along and not talking to anyone. Often I had passed one along the road talking to himself. A sundowner could be seen anywhere but mostly in the outback. They visited big farms, cattle stations and sheep stations mainly for their food. They never worked unless they couldn't possibly avoid it and arranged to arrive at these places when it was getting dark. They called at the manager's residence for a handout, were given a note to give to the chap who looked after the store and usually received plenty of flour, tea, sugar, meat, etc.; enough to

keep them going for a month. Often they received tobacco as well. They were called Sundowners as they usually arrived at sundown when it was too late to work, collected their handout and left again at daylight before work started. They were known throughout Australia and nobody turned them away. Some who did, found themselves short of a couple of chickens or a jumbuck had disappeared from the paddock and the farmers got no sympathy from the police if they complained about their loss. These chaps lived out their lives on the road, and often died by the side of the road, under a bridge or in a hut somewhere often without any identity, not even a name to identify them. They could have been called professionals, if there was such a category of swagmen. It was not bush etiquette to turn these people away without filling their tucker bag. So much for these old "sundowners".

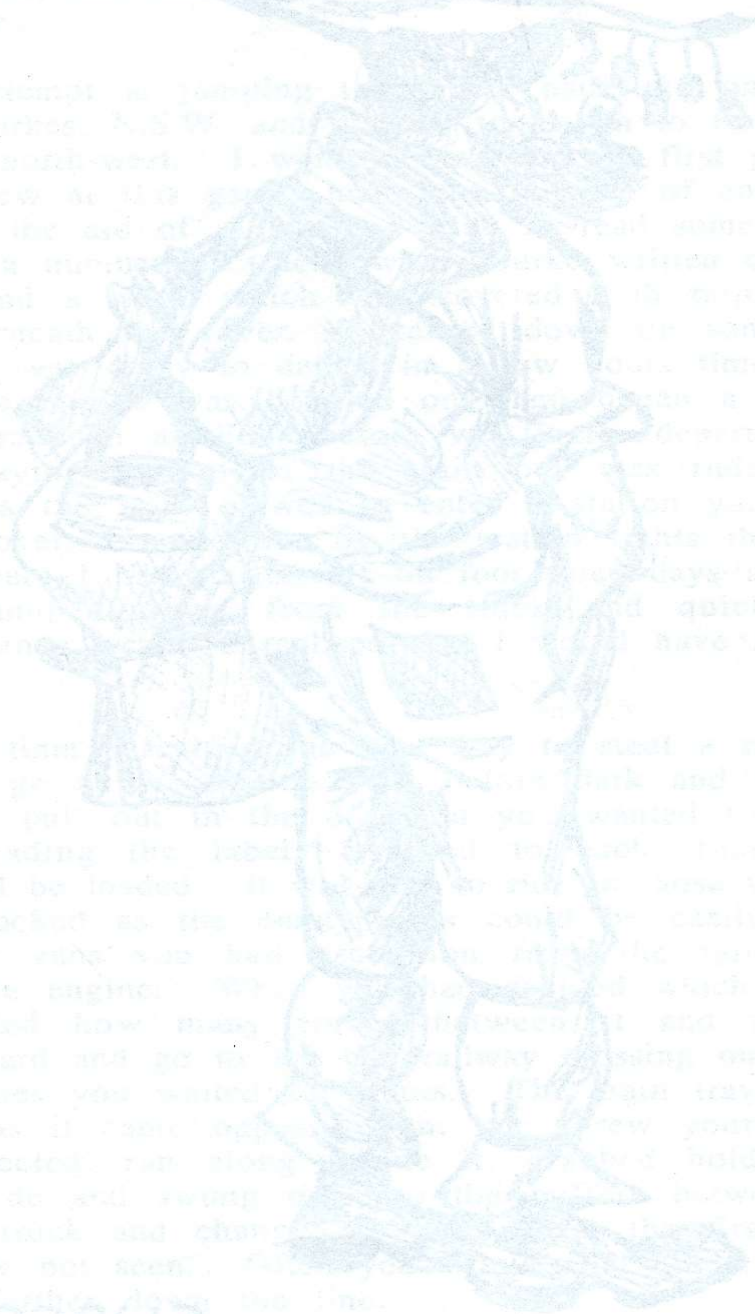
The second type of swagmen were men of all ages who tramped the roads looking for work and taking whatever was offered. They came from all walks of life - professionals, doctors, dentists, bankers, printers, carpenters, plumbers, etc., as well as the lowly wage earner. They took to the roads for many reasons. Some could not settle down after the war, others because of domestic problems and of course, those who had simply run away from home like myself. At night they would gather together in some place, sometimes up to a dozen around a campfire drinking tea and telling yarns but during the day they usually travelled alone as it was easier for them to find jobs that way. They existed on seasonal work or odd jobs when they could get it and handouts when they could not. Many times they went hungry. In Victoria, it was called "carrying the swag" and you could tell them anywhere by the two straps around their swag. In New South Wales it was called "humping the bluey", and they had three straps around their swags, while in Queensland, and in the outback, it was called "waltzing matilda" and their swag was tied with rope and was longer and thinner. There are various interpretations of Matilda, the most common was that Matilda being a woman's name, and as a woman is comfort to a man, so the swag became a comfort in the absence of a wife and a man had his home, bed, food, medicine and all his needs on his back. Whatever happens, he said, "Matilda will supply me comforts". There are many other versions, but this is believed to be the authentic one, dating back one hundred years or more. Much poetry has been written about the swagman and his Matilda.

Other travellers could be seen on the roads in 1929. Those that were fortunate enough to own a horse road wherever they wished to go, but they were frowned upon by those on foot for having an unfair advantage. They were able to get to available jobs faster. They could also carry rabbit and fox traps on their saddles. When things were quiet, they could stop over for a spell, do some trapping and sell the skins. This way they were able to earn extra money to bide them over the bad times.

Some chaps could be seen pushing wheelbarrows or handcarts in which they carried their personal belongings as well as their tools of trade. They were able to get skilled jobs doing carpenter's, painter's, blacksmith's or plumber's work. These people stuck more to the towns and usually turned down jobs that were not in their line.

Last, but not least were the couples, usually with horse and cart. They would sleep in the cart or under it, according to weather conditions. They would travel the roads, looking for work where they could be together such as work in a pub where he could be rousabout and she in the kitchen. At shearing time the man could work in the shearing sheds and the woman do the cooking. Sometimes they went into sharefarming which was good, if they were lucky. They would work for a share of the earnings plus their keep. These people, like the swagmen, kept entirely to themselves.

Thousands of these people travelled the roads from the bottom of Victoria to the top of Queensland, along what was called the "beaten track" and known through to the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia as "off the beaten track" or the "outback". The common practice was to arrive at a place where seasonal work was already to begin, fruit picking, harvesting, shearing, cane cutting, grape picking, etc. about one week before and camp near the gate. When the time came, the squatter, manager, or whoever was in charge would come along and look us all over. If he saw anyone he had employed before and who had given him good service, he was chosen first. Next to be employed was whoever had come earliest till he had enough men. Some who missed out often waited another week or so, in case someone was put off or left, leaving a vacancy. The rest would start moving on to the next possibility of work.





SWAGGY

Chapter 7

Jumping The Rattler

There were two ways to get from job to job. If the next job prospect was only one hundred miles away or so, you walked, but if it was hundreds of miles away, the only way to get there quickly was to ride the freight trains. This was very dangerous and was called "jumping the rattler". People had lost arms and legs or even been killed falling under the wheels of a train, but this didn't deter anyone. In Victoria, there was no need for this practice as it was a small state with the towns close together, and you could get from one job to another by walking for up to ten days. In New South Wales, Queensland or in the outback you had to use this illegal mode of travel to cover the hundreds of miles between jobs.

My first attempt at jumping the rattler backfired on me. I had walked from Orange to Parkes, N.S.W. and decided to go on to Bourke which was about 300 miles to the north-west. I went looking for the first goods train going that way, and being new at this game, made the mistake of entering the goods yard after dark. With the aid of a match, I tried to read some of the labels on the trucks and found a number of trucks with Bourke written on them. I wandered along until I found a truck which was covered with tarpaulin. I climbed up and crawled underneath the cover. I settled down on some sacks of wheat to wait till the train was ready to depart in a few hours time. Suddenly I felt a severe jerk as the engine was coupled on, then began a lot of shunting back and forth for more than an hour before we finally departed. I was lulled to sleep by the swaying motion of the train but was rudely awakened by the whistle blowing as the train slowed to enter a station yard. As I looked out from under my cover, I could see by the station lights that we had arrived in Orange. Back where I had started off on foot three days ago! I swallowed my disappointment, jumped down from the truck and quickly left the railway yard. One experience richer, I realised that I would have to be more careful in the future.

In a short time I learned the best way to steal a ride on a goods train. The drill was to go to the station yard before dark and check if there was a train preparing to pull out in the direction you wanted to go. This could be ascertained by reading the labels attached to each truck. Some would be empty, some would be loaded. It was best to ride in those vans that had goods in them and were locked as the empty vans could be easily opened at the first stop. Inside the vans you had protection from the rain as well as cinders blowing out of the engine. When you had decided which truck you wanted to board, you counted how many trucks between it and the engine then you would leave the yard and go to the last railway crossing out of town to wait for it there. Sometimes you waited for hours. The train travelled slowly until the last crossing so as it came opposite you, you threw your swag into the truck that you had selected, ran along beside it, grabbed hold of the steel ladder attached to the side and swung up onto the buffers between the trucks. You climbed into the truck and changed to the van at the first opportunity, making sure that you were not seen. Often you would find others already in there who had climbed on further down the line.

There was definitely no comfort in this way of travelling. It was often freezing cold and you had to keep your head down so as not to be seen by the guard or engine driver. Some of these trips could take up to two or more days as the steam engine was no speedy monster in those days. We were not the only people who travelled the trains, so often railway detectives were in the guard's van.

When the train stopped at major stations they would get down and walk the line of trucks to ferret us out. The usual ruse was to call out: "Is there any room in there, mate?" and if any new chum was with us, he would often answer yes before we had time to warn him that this was a trick they used to get us to give ourselves away. If found they would call us to get off the train and march us up to the Police Station to be booked.

The detectives worked on the main lines in New South Wales. They worked hard to catch us and I often thought that perhaps they were paid bounty money, so much for each pair of ears they brought in. If so, they would have done well. In contrast, we had it much easier in Victoria. We never saw any detectives there and in Queensland we only saw them on the station platforms. They often turned their backs when the train went through.

Altogether I was caught five times. Once at Wagga Wagga, Goulburn and Grafton and twice at Yass. When many people were caught together, reinforcements were sent for and we would be herded like sheep to the lock-up to be charged and locked up for the night. After spending the night in the "cooler", we would be lined up before the Judge. There could be anything from five to thirty of us at a time. Then the charge would be read out. Always the same: "Caught riding on railway property without a ticket". The Judge would give his lecture on the evil ways of men after which all the names would be read out and checked off. We would be sentenced to a fine of ten shillings or three days gaol, always the same routine. Now ten shillings was a princely sum, and to be kept aside for a rainy day (those fortunate enough to have that much in their pockets) so we served the three days.

During the day we would work hard chopping wood, whitewashing and cleaning the cells among other jobs and at night we would be locked up again. I remember at the Goulburn lock-up we were let out for the day and the Sergeant set us to work. I asked him if I could work in his garden as he had a small plot fenced off in the backyard. I liked gardening at that time as it was more interesting than a lot of other jobs. He said "Definitely not". When asked why, this is what he told us. A few months before he let one of the prisoners work in his garden. He gave him a box of onions to transplant out into rows. A week later he noticed that they were dying and he could not think why. On investigation, he pulled at one of the tops and it came out of the ground without any bulb on the bottom and they were all like this. Apparently the chap was very fond of onions and had eaten all the bulbs before planting only the stalks! So never again would he let a swagman work in his vegetable garden.

At least while we were locked up we did not have to worry about where to sleep or what to eat. This was the usual routine except if you struck a Judge suffering from a hangover. Then the sentence would be more severe. At Yass I was unfortunately caught a second time one year later. One of the constables recognised me and knew that I had been there before so after the Judge was informed, it cost me one pound or seven days for the second offence. Apparently these offences, if they could be called such, never seemed to be recorded against us as convictions and were apparently forgotten. Possibly because of the work involved in recording or perhaps because of the depression. There were thousands of such cases and it was commonly known that many of the older men (if winter was coming on and they had no prospect of work) would commit some small offence, like throwing a brick through a window or stealing some small item, while making sure that he was seen doing it, so as to be able to spend the winter months at the government's expense. They sometimes misjudged the Judge and were let out in the middle of winter or kept in till half the summer was over but it was a gamble that they were prepared to take.

There was also another way of riding on the trains known as "riding the rods". You could only climb aboard this way while the train was standing, by crawling between the wheels and lying outstretched on the iron rods that formed the undercarriage of the truck. It was most uncomfortable and extremely dangerous. If you fell asleep lying there you could fall off and surely would not survive to tell about your experience.

I have seen people doing this, but I never had the courage or madness to try it myself. You would most certainly not be caught while riding the rods, as very few detectives would bother to stoop down to look under the truck. The men who rode this way were usually on the run from some crime or another, or had been caught many times in the places that they were trying to avoid. I have read that in the U.S.A. at that time it was common practice among the hoboes there. They were the equivalent of the swaggies in Australia, but perhaps their trucks were constructed differently, and it was safer to ride like that.

One of the things I worked with boasted that he was good at making pigeon pie and although there were no pigeons in this area there were plenty of fowls. I got a box without a lid, turned it upside down and propped one side up on a stick which had a string tied to the centre of it. I ran the string along the ground to the cabin and passed it through a crack in the logs. When we stopped for a lunch break I would put some bread under the box and while eating lunch would sit near the wall and peep through the crack while holding onto the string. As soon as I saw a parrot enter the trap I'd give the string a pull so that the stick would come away and the box dropped over the bird. I kept using every lunchtime till I had caught four of them. Then our chief having no facilities to bake a pie, roasted them in the hot coals for us. When they were removed it was hard to tell what was parrot and what was chicken. You would definitely not find this dish on the menu at the Ritz but we enjoyed our tasty meal and repeated it four or five times before the job petered out.

I wandered on, doing jobs over the next month and crossed over the border, marked by the Murray River, into New South Wales. It was here that I did something I regretted. I broke one of the codes that we lived by. I came to a very small place where there was a baker's shop, a store, a Post Office, a small school and a community hall. There was very little else except a few houses. As I didn't have much food left in my locker bag I decided to try for some bread at the bakery. I entered and asked the usual, "some bread for work if possible."

He took me to the back of his shop and pointed to the woodheap and asked me to split up some of this wood into small enough sticks for a good amount to light the oven in the morning. This seemed a reasonable request and only what was usually expected, but when I got a closer look I found that the wood was in two foot long blocks and those who had done this job before me had cleaned out all the easy splitting logs leaving behind all the knotted and twisted ones and a blunt axe to cut them with. I started chopping but soon I

Chapter 8

The Shotgun Sprint

I had left the dairy farm where I got my first job and travelled outback and found a job wattle barking. Three other men were already employed there. It was called a "back block" as the main farm was many miles away. This property was very dense with young wattle trees, growing as thickly as the hairs on one's head, and our job was to cut off the trees close to the ground, trim off the small branches and strip the bark off the rest of the tree. The trees were not very large at the base, about as thick as a man's arm. When we had finished an area we would gather up all the bark, tie it into bundles and stack it where it could be collected later. The remains of the tree were left scattered on the ground.

We continued this way for about a month till the block was finished. The bundles were collected and sent to the tanneries where it was used for the tanning of leather. When the bundles had all been removed, the area was set on fire and everything left was burnt. The rains would come later to germinate the seeds on the ground and the following year would see another crop of young wattle trees growing ready for the same process to begin again. While on the job we were given our food and lived in a cabin on the property. This cabin was built of round logs and had a bark roof. It was very cosy inside and I was sorry when this job came to an end even though I did not receive any wages. They had sent us plenty of food and the log cabin made a nice home.

One of the chaps I worked with boasted that he was good at making pigeon pie and although there were no pigeons in this area, there were plenty of rosella parrots which he said would do. I got a box without a lid, turned it upside down and propped one side up on a stick which had a string tied to the centre of it. I ran the string along the ground to the cabin and passed it through a crack in the logs. When we stopped for a lunch break I would put some bread under the box and while eating lunch would sit near the wall and peep through the crack while holding onto the string. As soon as I saw a parrot enter the trap I'd give the string a pull so that the stick would come away and the box dropped over the bird. I kept trying every lunchtime till I had caught four of them. Then our chef, having no facilities to bake a pie, roasted them in the hot coals for us. When they were removed it was hard to tell what was parrot and what was charcoal. You would definitely not find this dish on the menu at the Ritz but we enjoyed our tasty meal and repeated it four or five times before the job petered out.

I wandered on, doing jobs over the next month and crossed over the boarder, marked by the Murray River, into New South Wales. It was here that I did something I regretted. I broke one of the codes that we lived by. I came to a very small place where there was a baker's shop, a store-cum-Post Office, a small school and a community hall. There was very little else except a few houses. As I didn't have much food left in my tucker bag, I decided to try for some bread at the baker's. I entered and asked the usual, some bread for work if possible.

He took me to the back of his shop and pointed to the woodheap and asked me to split up some of this wood into small enough sticks for a good armload to light the oven in the morning. This seemed a reasonable request and only what was usually expected, but when I got a closer look I found that the wood was in two feet long blocks and those who had done this job before me had cleaned out all the easy splitting logs leaving behind all the knotted and twisted ones and a blunt axe to cut them with. I started chopping but soon I realised that I wasn't getting very far.

I decided to heap a few of the small logs together and cover them over with the sticks that I had cut and stepped back to admire my handiwork. It looked good enough from the back door and the baker wouldn't be needing the wood till the next morning so I went back to the shop and told the baker that I had finished the job. After looking up the backyard he appeared satisfied and gave me a loaf of bread.

I put it away in my tucker bag and left, intending to put as much distance as I could between the baker and myself before morning. I was quite a way down the road when I heard shouting behind me and glancing back, saw that the baker was running out of his shop with a shotgun in his hands! That frightened the daylights out of me and I got into second gear to keep the distance between us as these guns had a range of about 100 yards. If he got any closer I would have to get someone to pick the buckshot out of my bottom and that would be very embarrassing. The baker was very stout and appeared to have no other exercise except to bake bread and even though I had my swag to carry, it was hard to keep a safe distance from him until he stopped and yelled after me what he would "B..... do to me if I came into his shop again." What I had not anticipated was that as soon as I left the shop he would go to collect the wood, and discover what I had done. About two miles further down the road I came to a wooden bridge over a creek. I crossed over and went down under the other side to find a nice clear camping spot. I had the advantage of hearing anyone cross the bridge if the baker still decided to come looking for me, and there were plenty of reeds up the creek to hide in. These bridges were quite well constructed when new but as age caught up with them, the decking timbers got loose and rattled when anyone crossed over them.

Some time later when I had lit a fire, had the billy boiling and was cutting the bread to make toast, I was startled to hear clump! clump! across the bridge. Someone was passing over in a hurry. I dived for the reeds and on peeping out, saw another swagman coming down the side. He appeared to be very excited and out of breath. When he calmed down I asked him to help himself to tea and toast and tell me what had happened. He told me that when he had called at the baker's to ask for some bread, the baker took out a shotgun from under the counter, pointed it at him and told him to get out of his shop. This he did, fast, and had been burning up shoe leather till he arrived at the bridge. I then told him what I had done there so we had a good laugh about it, as by then we could see the funny side to it.

Later that night I realised what I had done. I had done what I had always been told not to do, that was, leave a place knowing that I could never come back this way again. I had also spoiled it for others who might follow in my footsteps as this chap had done. I really learned a lesson that day and knew that I would have to be more careful in the future. If faced with the same situation I should say that I could not do the job even though it would be hard to admit it. I knew that after a day or two the baker would need someone to cut his wood again, and that the swagman would again be relieving him of his stale bread. he would not be so easy to deal with anymore and he would be keeping his eyes open to see that he got his pound of flesh, not that I could blame him. On this thought I fell asleep.

Chapter 9

Tossing the Fleece

As I wandered north, the houses were ten to twenty miles apart and the distance between towns increased to 100 miles or more. Nevertheless, I managed to get more odd jobs at these isolated places because they were visited much less by swagmen than those down south. Some jobs lasted only one day and others a whole week so a few extra shillings kept coming my way, enough to keep me going. Eventually I came to quite a big station where I was told that the shearing would be starting in a week's time. They would find me work to keep me going till then and I could then help in the shed during shearing. I was surprised at the number of people who worked there; the squatter and his family, the overseer and his family and about ten other men as well as three Aborigines who did most of the outback work on horseback, repairing the fences, checking the windmills, etc. They appeared to be very good and trusted workers and were called "Jackaroos". They were always cheerful and always ready with a smile. Some had wives working in the house washing and cleaning while not far away there were camps where their uncles, aunts and cousins lived off the goodness of the station owner. They were always willing to do anything if called upon to do so. Naked little piccaninnies (Aboriginal children) ran around everywhere. This was the usual situation on any station in the outback, a little encampment of the natives' relatives and children close to a creek under a clump of trees.

The shearers arrived and were ready to start so there were many jobs for me to do. My main task was to pick up the fleeces that fell onto the floor as the sheep were shorn, toss it onto a large table made of wooden slats, pull off the rough, dirty edges, put it into a bale, then roll up the rest of the fleece and put it into another bale. For doing this, I earned the honourable title of "rouabout". I had to work hard to keep the floor and their working area clear. If I did not get the fleece out of the way before the shearer was ready with another sheep, he would start swearing so hard that the hairs on the back of my neck would stand on end. Before they had started shearing they had huddled together, talking in low tones, but as I was referred to as "the young'un", I was not included in their talk, and only later did I learn what it was all about.

As soon as the bell rang, the shearing began and a good shearer in action was really something to watch. There was plenty of competition among them and to be "the Ringer" or the top shearer, was a great honour. I came down to earth with a thud when the first shearer called "fleece!" I got off to a shaky start. There seemed to be another calling "fleece!" before I had finished with the first one. I was soon running to keep up with them and I had not worked so hard in all my life. I kept dropping the fleeces anywhere I could as long as they were out of the road and try to attend to them later. My back ached but I tried to keep my end up. I lasted two days but on the morning of the third day, I could not get out of my bunk. They had to call in another chap a few years older to replace me.

He was more used to this type of work. After the shearers had finished for the day and eaten supper, one of them brought food to the bunk for me and they all came to ask how I was. It was too painful to get out of bed. After four days rest, I was back on my feet again and ready for work in the shearing shed. This time there was two of us doing the job as the other chap was beginning to feel the strain. The shared job was easier and we did not get behind again. We were getting on quite well with the shearers by the time the job was finally done and the men gathered together outside the hut to have a drink and settle bets before going on to their next shearing job.

Apparently it was the custom that one man would open a betting book before shearing and take bets on things like, who would shear the most sheep, how many days it would take to do the job, and so on. The bookie also laid odds on how long I would last at the fleece table and they all lost as they all bet on my staying on my feet from four to eight days and not two days! An argument developed in which the losers insisted that the bookie pay me the four days that I had been off work seeing that he had won so much money on me. The voting was 9 to 1 against him and the hard stares he got encouraged him to pay up. They took the hat around to collect any spare coins to add to it so I finished up well ahead with plenty of money to buy tobacco and tucker. I went with them into town where they headed straight for the pub while I went on a buying spree.

I don't know how big that sheep station was, but I was told that I could walk 10 miles in any direction and still be within its boundaries. These were the stations that the sundowners visited and if my memory is correct, they used to kill three sheep and one steer each week to feed everyone. After this experience, I realized that this was one job that I was not built for as it called for a stronger back than mine. I knew that I had let them down badly even though they had not expected much from me because I was such a new chum at this work. I learnt this later from the betting. Eight days was the most they thought I could last. Out of my pay I bought a rabbit trap and some fishing gear as the river thereabouts had plenty of trout in them and I only needed "flies" to catch them with. A rabbit would make a change of diet and the skins could be sold for a few pence when dried. The shopkeepers must have been surprised to see a swaggy buying instead of the usual begging. I was a little sorry that I could not go on to the next job with the shearers but it was not the kind of work for me. They were a good crowd, slow of speech and hard-working. They liked their fun, but if anyone crossed them, they would fight at the drop of a hat and then shake hands afterwards with the incident forgotten.

Chapter 10

Lifting a Chicken

About one month after leaving the shearing shed job I had an experience that I will never forget, not only for what I learnt but from the narrow escape from justice. I came to a small town and as the size of a town was judged by the number of pubs, this one was known as the two-pub town. This information would tell a swagman just how big the town was and what he could expect to find there. As I approached it, I left the road and followed the creek behind it, looking for a good camping spot. If I found one, I could stay for a few days to do some washing and mending and check over anything else that needed attention. In a grassy hollow under some willow trees I came upon another chap camping there. He was about twice my age and obviously he had not long arrived as he was just getting his fire going. I joined him, sat and yarned about where we had been and what we had done. He told me that he was returning from Queensland as he had not found much to do up there. It was the off-season there at this time of the year. He was heading down to the western district of Victoria where he had heard, on the grapevine, that there would be plenty of work as the government was throwing open a lot of virgin bushland for settlement. He preferred timber cutting to fruit picking and he was going to jump a train the next day intending to get there as quickly as possible as it was about 900 miles away. I was getting hungry so I opened my tucker bag and asked him if he was going to eat. He answered that he was planning to eat a chicken supper much later that night and suggested that I wait and join him as he still had to get the chicken.

When he explained how he was going to get his choice supper, I thought that he was either crazy or must be joking and I would not go with him as it would only lead to trouble. But I was fascinated by what he told me and I felt that I had to see if his plan really worked. We had to wait until dark and the people settled down for the night. We went to a tree and broke off two small branches, one as thick as a broomstick, the other like a knitting needle. We left our boots at the camp as they would make too much noise but we had to be careful where we walked in our bare feet. We must have looked like a couple of burglars off to steal the crown jewels. We stripped the leaves off the sticks as we walked. With only the stars to see by, we made our way from the creek to the back of the houses. We saw a chicken house in one of the backyards and he warned me not to make a noise as we would wake a dog or disturb the fowls. We went through the back gate to the door of the fowl house. There we waited a while and listened but all was quiet. He opened the door, we went in and closed it behind us. We stood for a few minutes till our eyes became used to the darkness and could make out the interior. Two planks ran at an angle from the ground to the roof at the rear. Across these were three roosts on which about twenty chickens sat. They were quite old looking birds and probably had seen many eggs roll off their assembly lines. They certainly would not be as tasty as the chicken my mate had in mind. They were all sound asleep, with their heads tucked under their wings and their two feet clamped firmly around the roosts. I was getting butterflies in my stomach but having come this far, could not back out now. I watched my teacher go to work. He approached the first chicken, holding the thicker stick out in front of him, parallel to the roost but a few inches away from it. With the thin stick he started gently rubbing the chicken's leg up and down tickling it gently. Still sleeping, the chicken lifted its leg off the perch up to its body and before he could lower it my mate slipped the stick under the descending foot and the claws clamped around it. He proceeded to do the same thing with the other foot so eventually had the chicken's two feet planted firmly on his stick. He motioned to me to open the door and passed slowly through it and out of the yard while the chicken slept peacefully on.

When we were well away from the houses he took one hand off the stick, grabbed the chicken by the neck and hugged it to his body to stop the fluttering of wings and to keep it from making a noise. He wrung its neck, and the "fowl deed" was accomplished. I stoked up the fire to put the billy on to boil and when it was ready he poured water over it. Once the plucking and cleaning was finished I got the spike and the rabbit trap and dug a hole to put the remains in. The chicken was covered with the hot coals from the fire to roast. After we had finished eating, the remains were carefully gathered up, placed in the hole and covered over. With the evidence gone we could roll up in our blankets to sleep.

Come morning time, we were up and preparing breakfast when we saw a man approaching from the direction of the town. My mate said, "if this is trouble, let me do the talking". This, I was quite prepared to do and when the man reached our camp he was smiling and said "good morning". He seemed to be in a good humour and asked us if we were enjoying our stay. At the same time his eyes never stopped roving around and asked us if we enjoyed our supper. My mate replied that he had and added that I had just joined him for breakfast while passing through. "Strange time to be making camp, isn't it usual to do this at sundown?" "Yes", said my mate and added that I had unrolled my swag to lay on while having breakfast. Up till this moment I had not said a word and thought it unwise to do so, afraid I might give something away. This chap seemed to know as much about swagmen as we did. Then he said that he was the town Constable and lived not far from our camp, and that a strange thing had happened that morning. When he got up and went to feed his chickens, he noticed that the speckled one was missing. The others were all plain white chickens and she was the only different one but it wouldn't have been noticed in the dark. It couldn't have been a fox because he wouldn't have closed the door and gate after him and would have left a trail of feathers to follow. Instead he had found a trail of gumleaves that had been pulled from a stick leading to our camp. He walked around until he found the freshly dug ground and scraped the soil away with his boot to find the remains of his departed chicken. "I see that the remains got a decent burial at least," he said. Then he turned to me, saying "In future be careful who you camp with. This chap could have led you into trouble if you had arrived last night, so be off with you, lad, and don't let me see you here again. I am taking this chap in as he has to compensate me for my loss." and away they went. The constable was wide awake and I'm sure that he knew I had camped there the night before. He also knew which one of us had stolen his chicken but he never got angry about it. So this was another place I would have to give a wide berth to as he would certainly remember me again. Some people never learn!

I would never have believed what happened in that chicken house if I had not seen it with my own eyes. You must try it sometime, it really works. But be sure that it is not someone else's fowlhouse. At least stick to your own chickens until you get some practice.

Chapter 11

South to the Settlement

I moved away from that town very smartly as it would have been unwise to chance my good fortune in being let off so lightly. I imagined that my mate would get at least one month in goal, especially if the Judge was on the Constable's side and perhaps the chicken's side. Stealing then was a serious crime and was severely frowned upon. It was not in the same category as train-jumping or vagrancy, both of which were common practice at that time. In some towns where the police were more officious, they would pick up all the "swaggies" they could find and try to pin a vagrancy charge on them. Vagrancy meant "having no visible means of support", but if you had a shilling in your pocket or offered to pay or work for what you got, then they had to let you go. I heard tell of some smart alec type who, when brought up on a charge of having no visible means of support, pulled up his trouser legs and asked the Judge, "what would you call these?" But he picked the wrong man on the bench to joke with and so got three days for vagrancy and seven additional days for contempt of Court. Another interesting story I heard was about a chap who, while waiting for a train to be loaded ready to leave the station, looked through the louvres of a van and noticed that it contained shoe boxes being sent up the line. He looked around the station yard, found a good stout bar and with this broke open the lock on the van, crawled in, closed the door and waited for the van to pull out. He hunted through the boxes to see if he could find shoes his size but to his surprise, he found that the boxes only contained one left shoe and not the right one. Frantically he kept opening more and more boxes only to find them all the same. Someone noticed that the lock was missing when the train stopped at a station and on investigation, found him hiding under the shoe boxes. When brought to Court, he learnt that the shoes were only samples being sent to a new shop to use in the window display. He received for his troubles one month's sentence for breaking into government property. As he never actually took anything he was told that he would have to stand on his left leg for an hour every day of his sentence for his intent to steal and the damage he did to the shoe boxes. The Judges could always think up some trick to trap the unwary and if they thought that you were trying to wriggle out of a charge, the longer the sentence would be. It did have its humorous side especially if it happened to someone else and not yourself. On the rare times that I was brought face to face with these bewigged gentlemen, known to the swagmen as "up before the beak", I found them very fair and only doing the job they were paid to do. If we had behaved ourselves we would not have been there in the first place and as long as we did not try to give them any trouble they usually handed down the minimum sentence that a particular case called for.

In the summer, life on the track was a good, healthy one. Nearly all the jobs were outdoors and most times you were able to jingle a few coins in your pocket. Sadly, winter was a different story as work was scarce. As the days became shorter and colder it was necessary to find shelter. Sheltering under bridges had to be avoided as the river could rise during the night and all your belongings would be waterlogged. Often the wood became too wet to light a fire. The places to keep your eye out for were barns, haysheds, cattle shelters or other empty buildings, stands in football grounds and fairgrounds. Waiting rooms on railway stations were good, but you had to be sure to leave before the first train arrived in the morning. Shelter sheds in schoolgrounds were favoured dry spots, but there again, they had to be vacated before the children arrived the next morning.

In an emergency, when the weather was really bad and you couldn't find any other shelter, you could often get some supper and a bed in a cell at the police station if you were willing to do something in return the next day.

Of course, such luxurious accommodation depended on there being not too many lodgers in the cells already in a voluntary or compulsory capacity. It was strange that the swagman was hounded by these chaps in the summer and was always asked to move on but in the winter months they would not be turned away in the rain without a meal or a bed. About the only job available during this time of the year was cutting wood. Much more was needed during the winter as nearly all cooking and heating appliances used wood. Apart from this work, we had to rely upon people's kindness to get something to eat and many a cold, hungry night was my fate. I was lucky as I had a good swag containing all that I needed. I had as much as I could carry and only had to forage for food.

The most enjoyable part of this life was when we would gather around a campfire at night, yarning about our experiences and swapping stories. It was good companionship, most of the stories were true and there was no point in boasting as we were only together one night and would usually go our separate ways the next day, never to meet again. One such story was about an undertaker who lived in a small town up the line far away from the large towns. He had to keep in store eight to ten coffins in order to be prepared for the event that somebody died suddenly and there wouldn't be enough time to wait for the coffin to arrive from the city down the line. As he lived in a three roomed house with his wife and eight children, his problem was where to store these coffins. He solved this problem simply by taking the lids off some of the coffins and using them as beds for the smaller kids and the other coffins he placed around the table to be used as seats. When a coffin was needed, the undertaker took out whichever size coffin was needed then he had to reshuffle all the other coffins about in order not to upset his domestic arrangements.

These camps were found wherever wood and water was plentiful. On Sundays it was usual to camp for a whole day, bathe, wash clothes in time to dry them and do anything else that needed attention. Now that I had left the place of the "fowl deed" as I called it, far behind me and began to think about what my "partner in crime" had said about working in Victoria. I wondered whether this would be my first chance to get a permanent job. If they were settling in this new area there should be lots of jobs available. It would mean that I would have to jump the rattler to get there quickly as 900 miles would take at least six weeks to cover on foot. So I made up my mind that I would have to travel by train and headed down through the south west.

Most of the trains seemed to be going only short distances so I often had to leave one, to jump another, slowly working my way down. I got caught once on this journey and was delayed for three days at "His Majesty's pleasure". Thankfully this was the last time I had this experience and I made good time until I reached the Victorian border. There the rail gauge changed and everything had to be reloaded onto another train. After checking the goods train going south, I found that they stopped at every "one pub" town down the line. It would have taken too long so I decided to walk the remaining 360 miles to reach the end of my journey. The further south I went, the harder the jobs were to find. The towns were closer together and the people seemed much poorer with many on the dole. The farms were also quite small and appeared to be having a hard time surviving, so work and handouts were getting harder to find. I was beginning to regret my decision to come south and the weather was getting a lot colder with the winter arriving. Most people were going into hibernation and few could be seen out of doors. When I was within 40 miles of the settlement, my intended destination, the sole came off from one of my boots and my foot became sore and began to bleed as a result of the stones along the side of the road. The other boot was also coming apart, my foot was hurting badly and to make matters worse, I had run out of food.

I was determined to finish the journey at all costs so I kept going. An old lady who owned a cottage and some fruit trees along the way gave me some fruit but as I tramped along my feet got so bad that I was walking like a cripple. I had to stop and rest so often that it took me three days to cover those last 40 miles. At last I came to the end of my journey to find that the entire area was bush and forest. Every mile along the road there was a house, each one built the same, comprising of four small rooms and erected by the Settlement Commission. The first few houses that I tried were either unoccupied as yet or the people were away. Then I struck it lucky as the welcome sign of smoke was coming from the chimney of the next house. I was at the end of my tether and I would not have been able to walk another step without food and rest. Little did I know that when I knocked on that door, that simple act would change my life forever.

I knocked and the door was opened by a small lady who stepped back a pace on her first sight of me. I know I must have looked a sight fit to frighten anyone. To reassure her I told her that I was looking for work and had heard that jobs could be found in this area. She called her husband to the door and told him that I was looking for work. I knew that I looked in no fit condition to do anything and thought she was going to turn me away but instead she told him to put the kettle on to boil while she fixed me a bed in the tin shed at the rear of the house. When she returned she asked me to sit down for some cake and tea. Then she sent her husband to light the copper in the shed to heat some water for a bath, and when it was ready he filled a tub for me and I really appreciated that bath. The lady then found a pair of her husband's pyjamas and slippers for me to wear. After a bath, with my feet attended to, I was shown to my bed and told to sleep and later I would be woken for some supper. I thought that if there were angels on earth, then this small lady must be one of them. Later her hubby woke me, propped me up so that I could eat and put a tray of food beside the bed. He asked me many questions about myself and how I had arrived here. After explaining everything to his satisfaction, he said that there was plenty of work in the settlement but what I hadn't been told was that there was no money about to pay for it. He said that he would enquire around to see if there was a place for me to work and if they would take me on. For the present, I was to take it easy until I could walk again and not to worry how long it took. His wife insisted that I could not leave until I was rested and fed. I noticed another two beds in this room and soon discovered that they belonged to their two sons, Tommy, the eldest, and Roy. They also had a daughter, Ida. She had a room in the house which consisted of two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen and appeared very small. The shed at the back was for storage of the harness, washing facilities and a portion divided off for a bedroom.

From that day on I was treated like one of their own, and got on very well with all of the family. They were so kind to me. The next morning I was up and about and found that my clothes had been washed and mended. A special effort had been made to get mine clean as they couldn't find any clothes my size. I felt a lot better after I had dressed and walked around for a while. My feet were still sore but healing fast and the slippers made it a lot easier to walk. That day I ate my meals in the kitchen with the family and learnt more about the situation at the settlement, which was called "Heytsbury Settlement". About six square miles of forest had been split up into 200 acre blocks with a small house on each. They were given out for selection and the people who took up these blocks came from far and wide. Many of them had never seen their properties until they came to settle on them so it must have been quite a shock to find that it was entirely forest. The selection of the properties was mainly done through the mail, sight unseen.

One settler had come down from the Mallee in Northern Victoria and had no idea what to expect. He drove a large four-wheel, canvas covered wagon

drawn by a four horse team and it must have taken him a long time to travel the 330 miles. Before he left he had discarded most of his furniture and loaded his wagon with tons of wood blocks because, as he explained to his wife, "it's no good going there if we have nothing to cook with", but found to his dismay that the only thing there, was timber - much like taking a bucket of water to the sea. Most of these folks had little or no money, and the Government assisted them with loans. When the settler had cut down one acre of trees he was paid for his work, after he removed the stumps and cleared off the acre he was again paid, also for every chain length of fencing he was paid. In this way he was progressively paid as the work of clearing his block proceeded. All the monies paid to the settler were in the form of long term loans, and had to be repaid from his income when the property became productive, beginning with small amounts and increasing as his income increased till it was fully paid. The repayments could take up to twenty or thirty years but these people were happy to have work knowing that in the future they would eventually own their own farms. They were unable to employ any labour to help them as they were not paid any money till they had completed each stage of work and inspected by the commissions agent. Even if they could find people willing to work for just their keep, having to find extra food for one person was sometimes a problem as they were quite poor and would continue to be so until they could milk about ten cows. That would be the beginning of getting on their feet.

This was the position of the Parfitt family when I arrived. When I was fit and well again I did not want to leave until I had done something to repay these folk for taking me in. So for the next two weeks I cut timber which they were able to sell for ready cash. I was no stranger to the axe and could cut a few tons in one day. They bought me a pair of boots and some clothes to replace the worst of mine. They did not have to pay for their goods at the local store until their next cheque arrived. This was known as "putting it on the slate" and the money was paid at the first opportunity during the next three months. These stores carried anything from needles and thread to barbed wire; anything that the settler might require for his land, house or personal needs. After I had been with this family for a few weeks they found me a job with the husband's brother-in-law, a settler who lived about six miles away. The family made me promise to come and visit them every second Sunday, the day of rest when the only work done was attending to the animals. Mr and Mrs Parfitt asked me to call them Uncle Jim and Aunty Laura so I was very happy and felt at home with this family. Whenever I was able, I tried to do things for them to repay their kindness to me.

This new family I worked for was much larger. There were three boys and four girls and with them, all working, they had progressed a lot further than the Parfitt's in clearing their land. When I arrived they had about 30 acres of grass and were milking six cows. They also had the mail contract for the settlement. One of the boys or dad would pick up any mail and take it to the Post Office and return with the day's mail and papers to distribute to the settlers. Firstly it was done on horseback then by horse and cart which enabled them to carry other goods as well. Together with the mail contract and their small cream cheque they were better off financially than most of the other settlers. I camped in the horse stable with the second eldest son, Alan, but the noise of the horses chewing at the feed bin and moving about the stalls made it hard to sleep. Eventually we got used to the noise and we appreciated the warmth in winter and could leave the doors open if it got too hot. The horse rugs were used as blankets when it was cold. Alan and I found a discarded gramophone so we took out the motor and turntable and set it up on a shelf. We bought some needles and one record which played "Home on the Range" on one side and "Wagon Wheels" on the other. After playing it every night for a month, the boss came and told us that if he had to listen to those songs one more night he would take the record and burn it. That record was

worn out anyway so we got someone to bring some more records from town for us. We added a mouth organ and some song books to our collection so we could amuse ourselves at night.

One wintry morning, Alan and his father, Andy set off for Terang with the horse and cart to pick up some supplies. Part of the road was just a bush track deeply rutted by the bullock teams and their heavy wagons but the last stretch of road was covered with gravel. Father and son reached the town without any mishap and loaded up the supplies, as much as it would hold but not considering how much the old horse could pull. At first the return journey went well but only five miles from town the horse stopped and wouldn't go any further. After a rest and a feed the horse was able to continue but they stopped every so often to rest him. Eventually they reached a point where the horse staggered from one side of the track to the other and looked ready to drop so they turned into a nearby paddock to unload the cart, unharness the horse and let him loose. They were still miles from home and it was getting dark so Alan, with the help of his father, hoisted a sack of flour on his back while Andy carried a bag of sugar under one arm and a bag of groceries under the other and off they went down the track, picking their way through the deep ruts. A mile or so further on Alan slipped and one of his boots went into a wheel rut and stuck fast. He called out to his father for help as the weight of his sack was bending him over, pushing his face into the mud.

Andy had first to find a dry spot to put his own load down before he could remove Alan's load off his back. The suction of the mud was so strong that Alan's boot was left behind when his dad lifted him out. Andy's boot also was stuck fast after all the heaving and lifting. It took them three hours to cover the last three miles home. They looked quite a sight, trudging along with one boot on and one boot off! Next morning Alan saw the comic side of their night's adventure and started laughing but Andy was furious. "So you think that was funny. Now you get a shovel, go back and dig those boots out before the first wagon comes through or we'll lose those boots! The loss of those boots will set me back at least four shillings!" Alan returned four hours later, carrying the boots and the shovel. This time he wasn't laughing.

About a week later, the joke was on Andy. Amy, his wife said to him, "Our neighbour up the road has some cows for sale. Go and buy us a good milking-cow so we can have enough milk for the family, but make sure it is a good one. Don't let those people pull the wool over your eyes." Andy set off on his mission the next day and was back at noon, leading a cow by a rope. Amy, hearing them arrive, came out by the kitchen door to inspect the animal. After looking the cow over, she cried, "Do you call that critter a cow? It doesn't look good to me. Now you listen to me, my good man. If this cow does not give us a good quantity of milk in the morning, you'll take her back to where she came from." The cow was turned into the paddock for the night. We had all heard the conversation so when two of our friends came over that evening, Alan, with the big grin on his face, talked with them about how he could cause his father to be chewed out by mum. Early next morning, while it was still dark, Alan's two friends came and milked the cow and hid the bucket-full of milk in the shed. About an hour later, Alan's mum got up and she too went to milk the cow. As was expected she only got a cupfull of milk. Furious, she called out to her husband, "Andy, come here. I have some words to say to you. Look at these drops of milk I got out of that miserable bag of bones. Now you can take her back to exchange her or get our money back. This time be sure to have your glasses on your nose." Off Andy went with a long face, put the rope back on the cow and lead her out the gate, very dejectedly, after his wife's tongue-lashing. When the boys saw them well along the track, they produced the bucket-full of milk and told Amy about the prank that they had played. Much to her embarrassment, she had to call out to her hubby to bring back the cow, who was to become a faithful member of the family.

I stayed there for about six months. The work was hard but very satisfying. Each fortnight I would visit Uncle Jim's place, arriving in time for afternoon tea. Before supper he would show me what he had done in the last two weeks. Being on his own, the progress was slow but he was proud of his achievements. After a few visits, Aunt Laura asked if I would come over earlier so that I could come to church with them. I was happy to as I wanted to spend as much time with them as I could and I had come to love them as if they really were my own family. I didn't know what went on within the four walls of a church before my first visit, and felt quite embarrassed not knowing when to stand or sit, but after a while I got the hang of it. I liked the singing although I had a terrible voice; Aunt Laura said that God gave me a good voice but the rough passage out ruined it. I must admit that I used to sleep through most of the sermons and was often rudely wakened with a dig in the ribs from Aunt's elbow. I went with them whenever possible and I enjoyed the stories from the Bible but I would have been more at home in Sunday School than in church.

Chapter 12

Brother Eddy

When I saw that my present employer no longer required me, I rolled my ever faithful swag and took to the road again. After travelling for only one day, I landed a job of woodcutting at Garvoc, a small place on the Warnambool Highway. This chap had three contracts, each to supply fifty tons of wood and was unable to do the work himself so was in danger of losing the contracts, which were renewed annually. I settled down in the humpy (a small bark hut shaped like a tent), and tried to make the most of the short, winter days and have the loads cut on time. I would be paid one shilling and sixpence for each ton. I had become very proficient with the axe, or so I thought until I attended a woodcutting contest at the local agricultural show. I was just a babe in arms compared with these axemen who could fell a tree, twelve inches thick, in a matter of moments without appearing to use any effort. It would take at least three weeks for me to cut fifty tons if the timber was good and straight.

The first morning was spent in town, shopping for a good quality axe, a file and hand stone; from the butcher I bought a large portion of rolled corn beef and enough oatmeal, bread, sugar, potatoes, etc. from the grocer to keep me going for a while. The afternoon was spent in filing and honing the axe until it was sharp enough to shave with. That evening I boiled the beef, a large amount of potatoes and two pounds of oatmeal on the fire, hoping that for the next week I would be able to work longer and only warm up a portion of food for each meal. When the food was ready, I hung it from the limb of a tree in my tucker bag to keep it away from the flies and ants. I had a flying start the next morning, but my good idea backfired on me as four days later boils started to appear on my neck, arms and legs. Each day more appeared and they increased in size so it became very painful to turn my head or move my arms. I tried to ignore the boils and continue on with my work, tying strips of my spare underwear to cover them and stop them from rubbing. Eventually, it got so bad that I couldn't sleep so in desperation, I walked into Terang to find a doctor. He took one look at the mess I was in and asked what I had been eating. He said, no more porridge - bread and milk instead and eat other meats instead of the corned beef, as these foods had been overheating the blood and resulted in the boils. He had rarely seen so many boils on one person. I was given some black ointment and patches to cover the worst of the boils. After following the doctor's advice, no more boils appeared and after only four days they were gone, leaving scars that took months to vanish. This experience delayed my work, but it worked out alright in the end so with some money in my pocket and the hideous boils gone, I was ready to face people again.

This time I travelled north through New South Wales to Queensland, not too worried if work was scarce as I had enough money if I rationed it out. I had started writing to Auntie Laura and Uncle Jim, telling them of my ups and downs and what jobs I was doing. Auntie was able to keep me informed on the news of the farm and how the family was progressing. I hoped that it would not be long before I was down that way again as I was missing them very much. I wanted to stay in the warmer climate for a while then work my way back through some of the outback stations.

I wanted to learn more about the Aborigines and their way of life without actually living with them. Their diet of snakes, lizards and other reptiles didn't appeal to my delicate stomach but they seemed to thrive on it and they were able to survive in desert country where white man could not.

I worked at sundry jobs but they were hard to get as many people were waiting for work. Most of them had travelled up like me, to get away from winter in the south but I was lucky enough to get work to keep me roaming

around Queensland. I enjoyed travelling around the inland and later saw much of the coastal region which was destined to become a paradise for the wealthy. Queensland had such a good climate, I could have possibly stayed there and become a sundowner as I felt drawn to that way of life. City people could never understand how enjoyable life could be, travelling around the country. I was comforted by the thought that there would always be a home to go to if I needed it.

I started thinking about my younger brother, Eddy who would be almost fourteen now. I really wanted to see him again so I decided that when I returned to the settlement, I would see if there was work for him. If successful, I would see if he wanted to leave with me and start anew. Many months later, when I arrived back at Uncle Jim's place, I learned that the Settlement Commission was paying wages of ten shillings a week to anyone willing to work on the blocks, with the settlers only supplying their board and lodgings. I found a place for Eddy if he was willing to come so off I went to Melbourne with a borrowed suitcase instead of my swag and travelled in style in a second class carriage. This time I would pay my fare and thumb my nose at the policemen, instead of having to hide from them under canvas covers or in cold trucks. I had enough money for both return fares and had visions of him arriving like a gentleman, not like I had. My only worry was whether he still lived in the same house and went to the same school. After reaching the city, I went to the gardens where I had tried to hook the goldfish and waited till school was out. When it was time I stood on the corner, knowing Eddy would have to pass this way. The kids who had been in my class would have left school by now so I was not afraid of being recognised. It was some years since I had caused problems at that school and I was much taller and looked quite tanned. I spotted Eddy walking along the street with some other boys and called out to him. He just stopped and stared. He had also grown taller and filled out a bit. He was a bit shocked to see me, he looked as if he had seen a ghost. "I thought you had forgotten about me and were never coming back," he exclaimed. We walked to the gardens to talk and I found out that things at home had changed very little. Uncle Ted was getting harder to live with and mother seemed to be in a daze most of the time, not caring what was going on around her. They had employed a woman to come each day to clean up and cook the one daily meal and two women from a welfare organisation had come regularly for a while to try to help mum but they had eventually given up.

Because he had not heard from me for so long after I had run away, Eddy was ready to walk out a couple of times but realised that I wouldn't be able to contact him so had decided to stick it out till I came or until he left school. Henry was alright as he worked long hours and only came home to sleep so as to avoid any contact with Uncle Ted whom he had come to detest. I asked Eddy to pack his belongings and come with me and bring Henry to meet me in the school shelter shed at school that night. It was quite late when they finally arrived and after greeting Henry, gave him Uncle Jim's address to keep in touch. After leaving Henry there, we went into the city and slept in the Salvation Army Hostel, not far from the railway station. As we passed through the platform gate the next morning I proudly presented our two tickets.

Eddy talked nonstop on the journey about nothing in particular, he had had no-one to confide in before. After arriving at the station, we started to walk but it was not long before a timber truck gave us a lift the rest of the way. Uncle Jim and Auntie Laura were very pleased to see Eddy and made him welcome, remarking on how much alike we were.

After supper Uncle Jim drove us to the property where Eddy would work, introduced him and waited for him to settle in before heading home. We were able to see one another regularly as we lived only four miles apart, doing the same kind of work. He was well looked after by the family and settled in

happily. The settlers were beginning to relax a little now as the extra labour speeded up the job of clearing the land and on each visit to Eddy I could see the improvement. In times of sickness and urgent work the neighbours often turned out to help one another or lend horses and equipment when required.

Because there was very little social life, any event would draw people from miles around. Some would arrive on horseback, bikes, or on foot while a few drove motor cars. Twice yearly, after lambing and after shearing, dances were held in Ludamans shearing shed. It was a very large building and the floor was well polished by the wool being dragged across it during shearing. This property was outside the settlement area and had been owned by the same family for more than sixty years. For as long as people could remember they had held these twice yearly dances, starting at 9 pm and continue till daylight. The "night owls" would go home to breakfast and a full day's work while the older ones would only last till 1 am. Each person would bring a plate of cakes, biscuits or sandwiches so every homestead would see the ladies baking something for supper, which was an all night affair. The water for tea and coffee would be boiled in large coppers. Between dances, the most popular place for the men was the large blacksmith's forge where each would take his turn pumping the bellows to keep a cherry red glow in the coke fire. Dances usually started and finished with a waltz and it was my pleasurable duty to have these with Aunty Laura. To ensure that all the ladies had a dance and were not left out, the men changed partners throughout the night. It was not polite to stand and hold the walls up or sit out a dance if there was a woman without a partner, no matter if she was fourteen or sixty years old. I always danced with the matronly ones that I knew as I was shy of the girls and they had enough partners. I would be caught when it was "ladies choice" as I would blush and get tongue tied when asked for a dance. These dances would be talked about for a long time afterwards.

Another popular event was the monthly dance held in the schoolhouse. About thirty pupils attended this school. On the afternoon of the dance, a team of boys would take all of the desks and chairs out to the shelter shed, pour kerosene over the floor and drag a bag of sawdust from one end of the floor to the other till it was slippery enough to slide on. Our musicians were armed with fiddles and accordians. These old timers enjoyed playing for these dances which finished about midnight so that the classroom could be put back into order ready for school the next morning. The Harvest Festival, held in the church each year was also looked forward to. People looked forward to these occasions as they were opportunities to catch up on all the local gossip and to meet one another in a friendly way.

Chapter 13

The Bull and The Snake

This heading may sound like the name of an English pub, but a pub has no connection with this story whatsoever. After three months my feet were getting itchy again so after being assured that Eddy was doing well, I decided to move on. The wheat harvest was due to begin so I went north to the Wimmera district, arriving at a large town called Donald in the middle of the wheat belt. I was told that it was known for its silos and mice by a storekeeper who asked me if I was looking for work. He told me about a chap who had called in earlier who was looking for someone to work for him. He would be in later to collect his goods after the cattle sale so I hung around the store waiting for his return. Later in the day the shopkeeper pointed him out so I went over to ask what job he was offering. He wanted an odd job man and would pay twelve shillings and sixpence a week plus keep to a good lad as his experienced hands were busy taking in the harvest. He undoubtedly expected me to earn my wages but I didn't think that he would be a hard man to work for.

After helping him to load up the wagon I settled down in the back on a sack of flour and we headed for home. On the way he told me what my duties would be. My day would start at 5.30 am, helping harness the horses for the day. There were twelve horses and they worked in teams of four. I had to learn exactly where each horse was placed in each team as they only worked well if harnessed in the same position each day. After the men had breakfast and the teams harnessed to the machines, I was to clean the stables, replace the straw and fill the mangers ready for the horses return as well as fill the twelve nose bags ready to be taken to the fields for the horses' midday feed. Then it was time for my breakfast and afterwards milk three cows, separating two thirds of the milk for cream and butter. At lunchtime I took food and tea to the workers in the fields and spent the rest of the day doing odd jobs for the farmer's wife till the teams returned and needed to be unharnessed and stalled for the night. By then it was time to wash up for supper, which was the only meal I ate with the other men. I felt that I would be able to handle this job as the farmer paid me well and the food was good so I was looking forward to a couple of months work on this farm. Unfortunately I did not stay the course as unforeseen things happened and I had to leave in a hurry.

The first thing happened on the night of my arrival. After supper I was shown to the room in the house where I would sleep. It contained harnesses waiting for repairs, odds and ends as well as bulk foodstuffs such as sugar and flour, etc. I dumped my swag, lay down on the bunk in the corner and was soon fast asleep. Around midnight I was wakened by a strange slithering noise which seemed to come from the floor. I pulled the blanket around me and watched the moonlight light up a patch on the floor. Suddenly I saw the largest snake I had ever seen. It was about seven foot long and as thick as my arm, moving all the time. I watched petrified and when I finally found my voice, let out a yell that I was sure would wake the house. A moment later the farmer appeared in the doorway in his long nightshirt asking what all the racket was about. When I told him about the snake in the room, he laughed and said, "Go back to sleep, that's Nellie. Didn't my wife tell you that she keeps her in here at night? She must have forgotten, never mind, get some sleep as you have to be up at 5.30 in the morning. Nellie's quite harmless." Needless to say, I couldn't go back to sleep in that room so a little later, after hearing no more movement from Nellie, I got out of bed and carefully tiptoed out of the door. I only relaxed when I had shut the door behind me. I crept quietly out of the house, trying not to wake anyone and curling up in one of the outbuildings, fell asleep. A bellow from the house wakened me in time to see the men washing at a long table outside the house and at my appearance, they began to laugh. The joke was definitely on me and because I was the youngest,

I had to take the brunt of their humour wherever I went. At breakfast the farmer's wife told me that Nellie usually stayed outside in the sheds, but during the harvest, the machinery drove the mice from the fields so she kept Nellie inside to protect her food stored there. Nellie only ate mice and had never been known to harm humans. I told her that I didn't want Nellie for a roommate, but was told, "Well you can take your digs out to the hayshed as Nellie stays where she is." Many farmers kept these carpet snakes as they could consume huge quantities of mice and they certainly made good mousetraps but usually made their homes around the haystacks.

Later on that day, I shifted my clothes out to the hayshed, climbed the ladder and placed my things on top of the hay, hoping that Nellie hadn't learned to climb ladders yet. Everything went smoothly for a few weeks as I settled down to the routine of the farm. A road ran through the middle of the property, dividing the house, outbuildings and wheatfields from the cowshed and grazing land for the cows, a bull and some sheep. Each morning I carried two buckets from the house, crossed the road, went through the gate and rattled the buckets for the three cows to come to the shed for milking while the rest of the stock remained outside. After cleaning up, I took the milk back to the house, thankful that the bull didn't come too close. Late one moonlit night, everyone was awakened by the bull standing at the fence opposite the house and bellowing without stopping. The boss came out in his white nightshirt, carrying a shotgun. He called for me to come down out of the hayshed so I pulled on my trousers and boots and climbed down. He asked me if I had ever used a shotgun and I replied that I had used one on Uncle Jim's property to drive the kangas out of the grass paddock. "Alright," he said, "listen carefully to what I want you to do. The bull has to be stopped so that the men can get some sleep. They have a hard day in the field tomorrow. I want you to go over the road to the other fence, get side on to that animal and give him a charge in the rear end. Be careful to keep well away from his eyes, I don't want him blinded and it won't hurt him as it's only loaded with rabbit shot. At least it will give him a fright and shut him up." I was surprised at this request and wondered why he didn't do it himself but I didn't want to lose my job so I didn't ask. When I got across the road I found that I had a problem as everytime I moved to his side, the bull would move also so that he could watch me. He seemed to be anticipating my every move; perhaps this had happened to him before. My chance came when he was distracted by one of the cows. After I fired, he stood still for a couple of seconds as if stunned and I was worried that I had done some damage. Suddenly he started switching his tail, snorted and turned and galloped down the paddock, giving us a peaceful night.

The trouble really began the next morning when I came to open the gate to milk the cows. The bull spotted me and came charging up to the fence with his head down and stood pawing and snorting. I left the buckets and went on with my other chores and waited till he wandered off down the bottom of the paddock with the rest of the animals. I managed to get through the gate without attracting his attention but when I got to the shed he saw me and again charged, cutting me off from the gate this time. I dropped the buckets, fell to the ground and rolled under the fence, ripping my pants and cutting myself on the backside and shoulder. It was a narrow escape but the barbed wire stopped him. I was in a lot of pain and blood was running down my leg. The farmer's wife came out to see what was happening and didn't seem at all surprised when I explained. She led me to the kitchen to doctor me up. I could see that she enjoyed pouring iodine over my wounds and when I squirmed she said, "Don't worry, I am used to doctoring the animals." Afterwards we went outside and telling me to keep away from the fence, she took the buckets and went to milk the cows. The bull took no notice of her but I thought that she was crazy. She took some milk into the house and gave me one bucket to separate. My wounds were getting more painful and I found it hard to bend and continue on with my jobs. I knew that I would eat standing up for a while. At lunch

time the boss asked what was wrong with me and when I explained he didn't turn a hair but told me that I would have to be on my way again as the bull wouldn't let me go over to milk the cows for a while. "You can understand why I sent you last night," he added, "You are replaceable but if I had gone, I would have had to get rid of a good bull, and that's something I wouldn't like to do." This made me wonder whether these people thought more of their animals than human beings. He paid me my wages and told me that he would be going into town for supplies and to pick up another lad that afternoon so I could ride in with him on the wagon. This suited me as I would be able to stand and hang onto the high side of the wagon. He told me that I might be able to get another job if I went to the store but I wasn't interested. I would be sore for quite a while and knew that I would be better off if I kept on walking. I was determined to keep away from friendly snakes and angry bulls.

While I was working on that farm I learnt about a new invention. I had heard of Indian "smoke signals", African "tom-tom" drums and "pony express" for getting news around fast but what I encountered beat them all. I saw a wooden box hanging precariously on the wall, two wires dangled from the ceiling and were connected to it and two batteries sat on a box underneath. This mystery box was called a party line telephone. If you wished to make a call, you had to lift off the earpiece, let it hang by the cord, with one hand hold the contraption to the wall, with the other hand turn the handle on the side vigorously, pick up the earpiece and wait for another to answer. You could wait thirty minutes for an answer. One afternoon as I was clearing the table and washing up as the farmer's wife had to go into town to see her daughter who was expecting a baby, the phone rang. I waited for our signal, which was three short and one long ring, and sure enough, it was for us. I picked up the handpiece and said, "Hello." A voice said, "I am the matron at the hospital and I want to tell the lady of the house that her daughter has a baby girl." As the message was given, I heard "ooh" and "aahs" down the line even before I had time to thank her for calling and inform her that the lady was already on her way to the hospital. I found out later that 20 farms shared this party line telephone and though every farmer had his own calling signal, nobody could prevent the wives from listening in on all the conversations. In this way they had an easy means of learning what was going on in the district.

I wrote to Auntie Laura letting her know that I was off again and gave her a Post Office address to write to. I wanted to hear any news of Eddy but six weeks had passed before I collected her letter. She wrote that Eddy was alright and had a letter from Henry saying that he was coming to join us. By that time he would have arrived at Uncle Jim's and would stay there till he found a job. This meant that I would soon have to retrace my steps. I went to the settlement and was reunited with my brothers and the Parfitt family. Eddy looked very fit and although Henry had that city, pasty look, time would soon change that.



1936

Chapter 14

Henry and His Boots

Henry soon started work for a settler whose property was covered with a dense growth of large, dead gum trees. This farmer wanted to use the timber for making charcoal as he thought that this would earn more income than selling the trees for firewood. The trees were cut down with the aid of a pair of horses and a heavy chain. After chopping off the branches and cutting the logs into equal sizes, they were piled up into big heaps. The logs were then set on fire and as soon as the blaze had a good hold, the logs were covered with soil dug out from around the pile. The fire was kept burning for several days, watched carefully and checked every four hours. If the fire broke through, more soil was added and all you could see was little wisps of smoke coming out from openings in the soil blanket. The fires had to be patrolled regularly because if the flames were not covered, the timber would burn to ashes and all the hard work would be wasted. If everything went well, the men waited till the fire burned out and the heap cooled down before raking off the soil and exposing the blackened, charcoal logs. This charcoal was then shovelled into sacks, ready for sale to blacksmiths or Melbourne factories. By the end of the day, the workers looked like black devils, with only the whites of their eyes showing through the soot. It was hard, dirty work but the money was clean. It was 1936 and little did these people know that in a few years time with petrol rationing because of the war, many heavy vehicles would change to charcoal burners to stay in business.

With Henry and Eddy working close by we were able to meet every weekend at one another's place and we had some very happy times together over the next few months. Unfortunately, it was not to last.

One evening Eddy went out shooting rabbits with some other lads his age. This pastime was quite popular as all the settlers had guns of some kind for keeping the kangaroos and foxes under control. During supper someone brought us the sad news that there had been an accident and Eddy had been fatally shot. I can't remember the exact details as I was too stunned to take it all in. It was such a shock, I felt responsible for bringing him away from Melbourne and wished I had never done so.

After the funeral, I decided to go away for a while until I could accept this great loss, so I packed up my things and was ready to go when Henry arrived. Auntie Laura had suggested he go with me as she felt that it wasn't good for me to be on my own at this time. It would be easier with company so together we headed up to the mountain country past Alexandria. This area was covered with dense timber and we found a job cutting fire breaks ready for the following summer. After cutting down the trees, the branches were heaped up and burnt while the logs were carted out to the nearest road to be sold. This job suited us fine as we were by ourselves. The baker called three times a week to leave bread for us and if we left a note, he would deliver other things from town for us as well. We had put an old box on one of the fenceposts for him. The property owner paid us weekly visits to see how we were going and to pay us.

I had a problem as Henry had brought very little with him and with winter approaching, he would need boots, blankets as well as other items. He suggested that we acquire a tent. This was a good idea but other items had to be bought first. The piece of canvas we used would suffice at present unless the weather turned bad. When the first weekly pay arrived, I left a note for the baker to deliver a pair of boots for Henry, but when they arrived a few days later they were a bit tight. I thought that they would be alright after a few days wear but soon he was hobbling badly. That night on the way back to camp

we met an old trapper who was working the ranges after foxes as the skins were fetching a high price at the time. When he saw Henry limping and was told the reason, he said, "That's not a problem. I know the remedy for that. I'll tell you what to do."

Many years before when he was carrying a swag, a Queensland squatter had given him a pair of riding boots that had belonged to his departed son. When he camped that night and tried them on, they were too small. He couldn't part with them because they were such handsome boots so at the next town he bought some wheat from the storekeeper, stuffed it into the boots, added some water and left them for a while. When the wheat swelled and stretched the leather, he was able to wear them comfortably. Armed with this information, Henry ordered a couple of pounds of wheat from town and set to work, filled the boots up, rammed it down with the handle of his knife and poured in the water. I was the first to wake in the morning and when I saw what had happened to the boots, I started laughing. This woke Henry who wanted to know what was so funny at this hour of the morning. Then he saw his boots. The wheat had swelled the boots to twice their normal size. The soles and heels were on the ground and there was a mound of swelled wheat on top with pieces of leather hanging on it, decorated like a sand-castle. Nearly all the stitches had burst. Henry didn't find it funny. He would have liked to have got his hands on that trapper. Of course, he had rammed in too much wheat and added too much water so something had to give. They were a new pair of boots so we could not bear to throw them away so we wrapped the remains in newspaper and asked the baker to take them to the bootmaker to be restitched. One week later they were returned and do you know, when Henry put them on they were a size too big so he had to wear two pairs of heavy woollen socks with them on.

I would often see the humour in these situations but not Henry. He had a different nature and always saw the grim side of things. This would sometimes cause a lot of strained feelings between us. He would get upset if I laughed at something that he couldn't see the funny side of. I used to say that he could only see the clouds, and not the sun, but I suppose the atmosphere at home would have had a greater effect on him as he had been living in that cheerless house longer than I had. After a few weeks pay we were able to buy a couple more blankets and later, a tent. It was only a small, light tent but it cost nearly a pound and was big enough for two people. It was so thin that I began to doubt if it would keep the rain out.

A few weeks later the heavy rains came and brought our work to a standstill. We were wet through a couple of times and even when the rain stopped, we would be drenched by a shower of water if we hit the tree with an axe. We ran out of dry clothes so on the boss's next visit he paid us off and we went into town to camp there. After breakfast next morning I told Henry that we ought to head up north where the winter would be milder and we would have more chance of work. But Henry refused to go, saying that he definitely didn't want to become a swagman and be on the move all the time. Walking the roads was not for him, he preferred to go back and work in the settlement during the winter. It was decided that we would have a parting of the ways. I wanted to take the tent and he would have his boots and blankets. This started quite an argument and we both grabbed the tent in a tug-of-war. As a result, the tent tore in half. What we ended up with was not much use to either of us. This was our worst run in and he left without a word. It was a pity that with Eddy gone, we should have stuck together, but it wasn't working out.

I travelled on until I came to Albury on the Murray River. I camped on the river for a few days and found no trouble getting jobs in the homes close by. One lady gave me some gardening to do and then the next door neighbour wanted wood cut as she lived alone. When she paid me she also gave me some

food and a bundle of clothes wrapped in brown paper. When I opened the parcel in my tent later I found that they were mourning clothes that must have belonged to an undertaker. They were all black and many sizes too big for me but I had a problem of what to do with them. I could not discard them so close to the owner so a few miles away I floated them down the Murray River. I hoped that if they were seen, no one would think that a man had fallen into the river.

At Wagga Wagga I got a job on a property. As it was winter there wasn't much to do so I was put to work repairing fencing and out-buildings or on wet days repairing harness' and doing odd jobs. I found time to make a sheath for my axe blade which was dangerous to carry unprotected. I was learning to make or repair all kinds of things but most places didn't have the right materials so I had to improvise. Many of the tools were old and neglected. I had yet to find a wood heap with a decent axe. These jobs helped me when no seasonal work was available and I met some very nice people this way. It was the man of the house who gave me work and paid the wages. The woman of the house helped in other ways, she gave me a tasty, home-cooked meal and often looked in her cupboards to see if she could give me any clothes that were better than what I was wearing. Sometimes the wives packed us some food to see us along the road as we were leaving. I remember the times when they loaded me up with more than I could carry or use so I would share some of it with other travellers. Many thought that these were bad times but I didn't think so. It depends on how you accepted life, what you expected from it and what you were prepared to contribute towards it. Perhaps if I hadn't had Uncle Jim's place to call home I might have felt differently.

Early in 1937 I received a letter from Aunty Laura informing me that Uncle Jim was going away to the military hospital for a check-up as he was having trouble with an old war wound, an injury to his hip. She asked if I was anywhere nearby and could come and stay while Uncle Jim was away as there would be work for me to do on the farm till he returned. I headed back immediately, riding the trains as much as possible but being careful not to get caught as this would delay me. I arrived three days before Uncle Jim was due to leave so he was able to give me instructions on what he wanted me to do on the farm and how to help Aunty Laura with her chores.

Monday mornings was washday so the drill was to light the fire under the copper in the washhouse and when it was going well, milk the cows. After breakfast Aunty would put the first load of whites into the boiling water in the copper. When they had boiled long enough, I would remove them and place them into the washing machine. This was quite a primitive affair and I have never seen another washing machine like it. An upright drum with a cone shaped bottom with holes in it sat on four legs. The washing was placed inside it and another cone with holes in it connected to a long handle was placed on top. A hose led from the bottom of the drum to the top, water was added and the plunger was worked up and down creating a suction effect on the clothes and drawing out the dirt without damaging them. Each load of washing needed about sixty strokes of the plunger so it was very hot work for me, especially working next to the boiling copper. The dirty water was then drained off and clean water added for rinsing. When finished, the washing was then removed and wound through the wringer before hanging on the line. There was no prouder person than Aunty Laura when she could see all her white washing fluttering in the wind. I had to help her hang out the washing as she was a very small person and wasn't very strong. She needed assistance with any heavy work but she was a wonderful cook and really excelled in the kitchen. During the winter nights she taught me to knit, firstly a scarf, then a pullover and lastly socks. From that day onwards I was never short of warm clothes.

Uncle Jim returned after a month's absence and when he was fit enough to be back in the saddle and didn't need me, I started looking around for another job. One day a chap with a dragsaw arrived looking for timber to cut so when Uncle Jim gave him permission to cut as much of his timber as he liked, he said that he could use my help. So this work solved my problem. The best trees for his machine were about one metre across as the saw had a two metre blade which was worked back and forwards through the log by an old petrol engine on two iron wheels. When set up, it could be operated by one man and my job was to help fell the trees and to split and stack the timber after it had been cut into two foot blocks. The stacks had to be four foot high to make it easy to calculate the tonnage. We were paid four shillings for each ton; I received one shilling, Uncle Jim was paid sixpence as payment for his timber and the balance went to the saw operator. On a very good day we could finish off with eight tons although we averaged five or six tons in a day. By coincidence, all three of us were named Jim so to avoid any confusion Uncle Jim was called "Jolly Jim" (as he was always in good humour), the chap who owned the saw was "Dragsaw Jim" and as I was the youngest, I had the title of "Young Jimmy". Uncle Jim's two boys, Tom and Roy also worked with us.

I continued visiting Henry every second week and he would visit me on the alternate weekends. It was 1938 and Uncle Jim told us that the news from Europe wasn't good. He listened to the overseas news on his old battery radio. He could smell a war brewing over there and he wasn't happy about what he was learning from the news. He urged both Henry and myself to join the militia to get some ground training as he thought that we would eventually be involved in a war with Germany. We weren't very interested at first as Europe and its problems seemed so remote but we finally decided to do as he advised as he had been a soldier in the Great War and knew better than us. The training wouldn't hurt us and it seemed the patriotic thing to do so we bought a couple of old bikes to travel the eighteen miles to the Drill Hall. We attended one night each week for three hours each time. Every three months we spent one afternoon at the rifle range and once a year went to camp for three weeks. We were paid two shillings each night we attended the Drill Hall and out of this money we would buy a pie and a cup of coffee before pedalling home again in the early hours of the morning. Uncle Jim felt that we were doing the right thing but Auntie Laura was upset about it. She remembered only too well what had happened before although she didn't say anything to discourage us.

The Depression was starting to ease up but the return to normality would take a long time. Everything on the farm was going smoothly. I carried on working for Dragsaw Jim. Every morning he arrived at 6.30 am and returned to Terang in the evening on his little "putt-putt" motorbike. Some Fridays he would bring his wife Teresa to spend the day with Auntie Laura. I will never know how that tiny bike carried the two of them thirty six miles over very rough roads.

I still helped Uncle Jim when he was hay making or needed an extra hand. When he decided to put down another bore and put up a windmill behind the house he needed some help and a neighbour, hearing what we were doing, came to give us a hand for a week till it was finished. You can guess what his name was, yes, it was another Jim, Jim Freckleton, so his name was reduced to Jim F. Auntie Laura was now cooking dinner for the four Jims, the two growing boys and Ida, who had become quite a young lady. One of the boys, Roy, would be the one to carry on the farm but Tom was mechanically minded and liked nothing better than to get astride a motorbike, particularly a racing bike.

Occasionally I would go shooting kangaroos when I had the time. They were doing a lot of damage to the fences and grass and the best time to catch them was at daybreak or at dusk when they came out to feed on the grass and

were away from the protection of the bush. The Victorian Government gave permission to destroy 100,000 of them. One day I remember shooting one kangaroo in the hip and as it struggled to get away I went after it on foot. The gun was empty when I caught up with it so I hit it on the head, breaking both the stock and its head. I bound the stock back with copper wire and it must have been a very good job as Roy tells me that he still uses that gun today. Another Sunday when I was out hunting in the bush with the boys, Alan brought with him a Winchester 44 (which could stop an elephant) but liked my shotgun better so we swapped over. I climbed a very large tree stump to get a better view while the others started beating the bush to frighten the kangaroos out. A few hopped past me amid the noise of many guns so as they drew level with me I aimed and pulled the trigger. As I did so, the gun flew out of my hands and I did a somersault backwards off the stump and landed in bushes. The boys found me a few minutes later. I thought that my shoulder was broken but luckily it was only bruised and was as good as new a week later.

Auntie Laura kept me busy learning to read by using the Old Testament stories. Each week she would ask me what I had read. I kept getting the stories mixed up so eventually she gave up trying. I don't think that I was very good when it came to books, but she gave me her Bible which I occasionally read when I was alone.

Chapter 15

The Loss of Henry and Enlistment

One night as we were having supper Henry's boss brought us the news that he had just rushed Henry to hospital as he had been badly injured by a falling tree. I planned to go with him the next morning to see him in hospital but on arrival, we were informed that Henry had been transferred to Melbourne hospital during the night. So we returned home so I could collect a few things. Uncle Jim decided to go with me to the city. When we finally arrived to see Henry the doctors asked us not to stay too long as Henry was in much pain and needed to have an operation. I returned home, planning to come back in a couple of days and spend more time with him. On the next visit Henry's boss came with me as well as Uncle Jim; Aunty Laura insisted as he had more experience with hospitals. We arrived too late. Henry died before we got there. All there was for me to do was fill in forms with Uncle Jim's help and identify him. We stayed on in Melbourne till after the funeral. Uncle Jim and Henry's boss paid all the expenses and wouldn't let me pay for anything.

I was 21 years old and with the death of Henry I had lost the last link with my family (Mother had not cared about us at all). I wanted to get away for a while but Aunty Laura didn't want me to be on my own so soon after the tragedy so she persuaded me to take a few days off and stay with them. Although I felt that I would be better off doing something to occupy my mind, I appreciated her understanding and talking to her helped me a great deal. I looked upon her as my mother.

With both my brothers gone, I realised that I had to start thinking seriously about the future. Up until now I had never made any plans, just let my feet take me where they wanted. The time of the "swaggy" was coming to an end. Work was easier to get and wages more respectable again and only those who didn't want to work would carry on the traditions of the sundowner. One day Uncle Jim noticed an advertisement in the paper announcing the sale of a property of 23 acres outside the settlement boundary. Its location was not mentioned but the owner lived about 20 miles away. It sounded good as it would be close to home and I started to dream about having some land of my own and becoming independent. I wanted to go immediately to see the owner before others got there before me. Uncle Jim said that he would be guarantor for me and help me any way he could. "But", he said, "think carefully before you commit yourself and go and look at the land before you buy, it isn't easy when you have big ideas but little money." So with this advice tucked away in the back of my mind, I rode off to see the owner of the property at his farm.

I hurried as best I could but the roads were very bad for my bike and it took me some time to get to my destination. I was worried that there might be a lot of people waiting like the line-up for a job. When I finally got there I was surprised to find no-one else waiting. The farm was an old, established one with plenty of sheep and cattle (it crossed my mind that this was an ideal place to get a handout). I went through the gate, pedalled up to the house and knocked. When the owner appeared and I explained that I had come about the lot he wanted to sell, he invited me in and asked if I had seen it. He explained that he owned a large property but when a road had been put through it, 23 acres had been lopped off and it was not profitable for him to farm it, so it had gone back to bush. Surprisingly, it was only a mile and a half from Uncle Jim's place, only 20 minutes walk. He was still paying taxes on it so he wanted to sell the block at 17 pounds an acre. He didn't think that I could afford to buy it and would prefer to have a cash sale instead of payments over many years but I still wanted to look at the property so he promised to hold the sale till the following day and give me first option to buy it.

Uncle Jim came with me to look at the place but only dense bush could be seen from the road so we couldn't get in to see what it was like inside. He thought that the price was a bit high and decided to go with me the next day as he realised that I had my heart set on it even though it would be back breaking work and I would only be able to clear it in my spare time. I would have to work to get the money to pay it off. I was happy to let Uncle Jim do the talking when we went back to the owner as I knew nothing about business. He told the farmer that 12 pounds an acre was a reasonable price as the land was so heavily timbered and I could only pay 3 pounds a month at present but increasing the payments as I earned more. He explained why I wanted a place of my own and that he would act as guarantor. He eventually agreed to the sale and I would sign all the necessary papers later. I left the farm feeling that I owned half the world even though I knew that it would take me ten years to completely own the land at the current rate I was paying.

I lost no time at all in getting the first acre cleared in one corner of the holding in order to build a hut on it. This I did with the help of neighbours. The four corner posts were as thick as my body and it took quite a few people to stand them upright in the holes that I had dug. I am sure that they would have supported the Eiffel Tower. The rest of the timber used for the hut were poles from the bush; the roof was covered with old flattened out drums; the walls were the same. It was very primitive but serviceable and measured four metres by seven. A fireplace took up the whole of one end wall. I cut sandstone blocks from a pit a few miles away to make a grand fireplace which could take logs two metres long. The whole structure cost about two pounds. I camped in this hut a few times but never really got to live in it as by now war had broken out. It was September 1939.

That November the Army set up enlistment centres at railway stations in the capital cities throughout Australia and called for volunteers for overseas service. Because I had some training I felt that I should go in with the first lot so I talked it over with Uncle Jim and Auntie Laura. It was alright with them, they had expected me to enlist. Uncle Jim imparted to me all the do's and don't's of the army; whatever I did, I must never let my mates down; I shouldn't try to fight the army, it would only lead to more trouble; the best way was just to follow orders. In short, "Grin and bear it." Auntie's advice was something different. I can still see the tears in her eyes as she said, "Your family tree is dying and even though your branch is still there, the limbs are falling off. I want you do nothing to disgrace the branch and maybe one day, new limbs will grow again." She reminded me to read the Bible, kissed me and turned away. It was six years before I returned home and saw her again.

Early next morning I got my gear together and packed away what I didn't need in a box for storage. I stowed my gear in the back of Uncle Jim's truck and before the family were up and about he drove me into the railway station to catch the first train into the city. He asked me to send any money I could spare and he would keep up the payments for me on my land while I was away. I met two other fellows on the train, who were also going to enlist, one of them I had met at the Drill Hall, the other was a farm hand who I got to know quite well. After arriving at Spencer Street Station we had to change trains and arrived at Flinders Street ten minutes later. The Enlistment Centre was not hard to find as quite a few young fellows crowded around it. There we were sworn into Overseas Service for the duration of the war plus one year extra and had to sign on the dotted line. All this had a familiar ring to it. It was like being charged, sentenced and locked up till you had served your time. The only difference was that this time it was voluntary and the Enlistment Officer didn't have a gavel to bang on the table.

We were given our fares to go to the Richmond Drill Hall. This hall was divided into small cubby holes and we all had to go through this maze, visiting

each one in turn before getting out the other end. The hall was full and I wondered how many would leave this place disappointed because they were not medically fit. There were all shapes, the tubby barrels, the little sawn-off ones, the long streaks like myself, every human shape and size. It was hard to believe that among all these human shapes and sizes were to come some of Australia's best soldiers. We continued on through the maze, papers in our hands. First the doctor, then the eye specialist, onward to the dentist, and so on till we reached the end. From there we were transported to a temporary camp in the Melbourne showgrounds.

Just before I left I noticed the farm lad whom I had met on the train just sitting against the wall outside. He was near to tears. He had been turned down because of flat feet; he would not be able to walk the long distances required. He was too ashamed to return to the farm as the family had been very kind to him, giving him a send-off party the night before. Now he would have to look for another job. I felt sorry for him and knew how I would have felt in the same situation.

On arrival at the showground, I sought out the other lad I'd travelled down with and we tried to stick together. Our allotted sleeping quarters was the cattle pavilion, others were placed in the horse stalls, the sheep pens and the pig pens; in that order as the camp filled up. There were no walls but at least we had a roof over our heads. We were lucky that it only rained every third day that summer. There was no other camp ready for us yet so we had to grab a sack, fill it with straw and make ourselves at home the best way we could. I had slept in far worse conditions so I didn't suffer as much as the city people. Some of them had brought sheets and had only slept on soft beds. After a few days of many crude jokes directed at them, the sheets disappeared. Many complaints were heard about the itchy straw and army blankets but after a month in our temporary camp, the men could sleep anywhere, even standing up. You couldn't get away with it on guard duty of course. What a motley crew we were, all shapes and sizes and from all walks of life. We all had one aim, to make good soldiers. Many would find it hard going as this life was quite foreign to them but others would take it in their stride. The army is a great leveller and many would soon get the rough edges knocked off them.

On that first morning in camp we had to get our kit and clothes from the quartermaster. When our name was called we filed through the store one at a time. I was always at the end of the line as the roll was called in alphabetical order. Those that had had military training were called to the orderly room but as I was still in the Q.M. store I missed out. I found out later from the lad I had travelled down with, that the army was short of instructors, so that was what they were going to be. Six years later I found out that he never left camp no matter how hard he tried, the Army was always short of instructors. He went on to acquire the rank of Sergeant Major so that was some compensation for him. He had warned me just in time. All day and every day they were asking for clerks, storemen, cooks, drivers, and many other trades to fill in the gaps while more and more rookies poured into the camp.

The "Susso" Unit
By R.A. Young AIF 1941

There was movement at the Showgrounds
For the word had passed around
That once again the Huns were bent
To thief King Georges crown

Mid hills and downs in far off town
They heard the far flung echo
Put down the axe forsake the plough
And turn towards the depot

From roaring mills and lonely hills
From cities, farms and banks
All packed their kit to do their bit
And help to swell the ranks

They turned the Showgrounds upside down
And damn near wrecked the depot
They carried their khaki inside
Diluted down with metho

They blazed a trail from Ascot Vale
To far away Kantara
The locals they just packed their digs
And scrambled for the Sahara

They roaded their way through Palestine
And howled this little ditty
We wanna go taste the wine
And see the Holy City

In Europe Adolf heard the news
Of the "Susso's" gang arrival
And then he shook in mortal fear
For the square-head tribes survival

When news got through to London town
They roared their acclamations
King George's voice was hoarse with tears
As he voiced his "Congratulations"

With Adolf live to see the day
Of his fears too well founded
His Army stoushed, his Navy licked
And his Airforce badly grounded

And as he stands among the ruins
A sadder man but wiser
He'll wish he heeded good advice
From his old pal, Bill the Kaiser

The "Susso" gang now lies at ease
Each in his little possie
And dreams of football, beer and cheese
Of Bourke Street "Plonk" and Aussie

Chapter 16

Off Overseas

Those of us who didn't volunteer for jobs were then formed into the 1st Company 2/4th Infantry Battalion. It was then that I met a chap called Ken from Wangaratta. He was eighteen, four years younger than me. I bribed the chap sleeping in the next bed to change and let Ken have his bed. It is hard to know what brings people together, the only thing that we had in common was that we both came from the country. He acted like a spoiled brat, probably because he had so many sisters who doted on him and did everything for him. Nevertheless he became my best mate.

It was quite amusing to see chaps sitting on the ends of their beds nursing sore and blistered feet after the parades and training were over for the day. In the beginning, training in heavy army boots is no joke and to make matters worse, one joker was going around telling the men that they had footrot from the animals that had been in the stalls before we came. The only advice that we received from the doctors was to change our socks every day and to spend a couple of hours each night rubbing polish into their boots to soften them. The little camp shop did a roaring trade in foot powder and other horse remedies for sore and swollen feet. They could sell anything, it didn't matter if it worked or not. After the first few days things began to settle down and get into some sort of routine. Leave was given from five in the afternoon till midnight, but if you were late there was always holes in the fence where you could crawl through. Most of the city boys went out each night but the leave was inadequate for any one who had to travel far.

One night Ken's folks had come into the city and he asked if I would like to meet them. I decided to take up his offer as the camp was dead after five and I would be glad of the break. Together we met his mother and two sisters. They were pleased to see him and had brought a lot of things to give him. Some of these he could not manage to take with him as there was little room for personal items in your kit, they would just have to be left behind when he moved. Unfortunately folks didn't think of how much we had to carry, they were only convinced that their men needed home comforts. His sisters took me aside and told me that they were happy to see that he had a mate who was a couple of years older than him. They hoped that I would look after him and see that he didn't get into trouble, especially when he drank, he often became irresponsible. This turned out to be an understatement but I didn't have the heart to tell them that I wasn't keen on being a babysitter to their brother, and promised to do my best to keep an eye on him whenever possible. They were a large family and they really spoiled Ken. Little did I know how much this family would help me some years later. Every few days another member of Ken's family came to visit him and I eventually met most of them. They all had the same request of me but this lad had a mind of his own and didn't wish to have a guardian angel looking after him. Nevertheless I promised them that I would do my best as they were very nice people. I really looked forward to their visits as it gave me an excuse to get away from camp occasionally. I didn't know anyone else from Melbourne.

Ken was a person who had to try everything. He tried cigarettes and didn't like them. When he tried beer he liked it so much that he became a heavy drinker and when beer wasn't available, he would drink anything. I could see that he and the Army were not going to get along as he didn't like discipline. Even though he was easy going, he disliked taking orders. I thought that he would change with time but he didn't. Three times he held stripes but every time he ended up losing them. Despite these faults, he was a good soldier and proved it many times.

The showground was getting very crowded and our new training camp seventy miles away would be finished in a week. This place was most suitable for the annual Royal Agricultural Show, but never as a training camp. By far the worst food I had ever eaten was given to us; most of it was inedible. The problem was, they kept trying out those men who had volunteered as cooks; if he was any good, he was packed off to catering school, if not, he would be out on his ear and the next volunteer take his place. We had to put up with this situation as the officers had more urgent things to attend to than the cookhouse. We survived, somehow. One story going around was about the day the "orderly officer" (whose duties included checking out the barracks, kitchen and mess hall) decided to look over the kitchen and see what the cook had been preparing to feed the boys for dinner as there had been a lot of grumbling about the food. The officer and his aide approached the stove, lifted the lid of the biggest pot and after taking a whiff of the contents, wrinkled his nose and asked the cook, "Tell me, good man, what kind of witch's brew is this supposed to be?" The cook, without batting an eyelid, answered, "Sir, I haven't decided yet. You see, if I add pepper and salt, it could be soup, but if I add sugar and milk it could be either coffee or cocoa."

We had been in the army six weeks when one morning they called out two hundred names, put us together, and told us to be ready to move out at any time. We thought that we were going to the new camp but a few days later all leave was cancelled. We were being sent overseas. Rumours said that we were going to England, France, and many other countries but of course, they were all guesses. The question was, with very little training, what could we do? All we were told was that we were an advance party, preparing the way for the first big convoy.

On the 11th January 1940, we sailed out of Melbourne. Hundreds of people saw us off even though our sailing was supposed to be a secret. Next morning a few more ships joined us and each morning when we went out on deck, more ships could be seen. Eventually the convoy numbered eleven or twelve ships. The trip was quite uneventful just the usual routine of lifeboat drills, parades and training in the cramped space available. Two-up, "rolling the bones" as dice were called and poker games went on all over the ship, wherever space could be found for six people to sit together. The food on the ship was quite good and we had a very easy trip across.

Eventually the convoy arrived at El Kantara on the Suez Canal in the early hours of the morning. Fed by rumours, the bookies odds favoured England or France as our eventual destination but these rumours were soon proved wrong. We were told to get our kit together as we were disembarking in Egypt and we would be proceeding to Palestine. The bookies had no bets on this country so they collected the lot and grew fat on that trip. Aussies were born gamblers and usually good losers but there was a lot of moaning about their losses that time. Firstly we were taken to a British Army Camp where we were fed in the open air and watched the sun rise over the desert. Later we were joined by troops from other ships. With full stomachs we were taken to a train station but our train was delayed after we had all loaded up because the engine driver and fireman refused to move till they had had breakfast. Even when the top brass tried to get them moving all they got was answers in Arabic which no-one could understand. Eventually we moved off and that night arrived at Lydda where we changed to bus transport for the trip to Jerusalem escorted by British Army vehicles. Everything moved in convoy this way as there was much trouble in Palestine at that time. We still wondered what we were doing in this place. Apparently our camps were not ready for occupation yet. Once again we were one step ahead of preparations and we seemed to be always waiting for things to catch up with us.

On arrival in Jerusalem, the buses dropped us all over the city, wherever there was accommodation for us. I was in the last couple of hundred which landed at the Hotel Fast situated near the Jaffa Gate into the Old City. As we looked up at the big glass front doors of the Hotel held open by a doorman, we began to wonder if the top brass had got his marbles mixed. We fully expected to be thrown out, it looked too luxurious for us. A mob of dirty troops like us who had travelled eighteen hours seemed out of place. We arrived in the wee small hours of the morning, utterly dumbfounded by the sight which met us in the dining room. Giant chandeliers lit up the tables set with white tablecloths, a wide assortment of silverware, beautiful crockery and crystal glasses. Everything bore the name of the hotel on it. I had never seen anything like it in my life. After we washed we had a good tuck in. There was plenty of food to spare as some of the lads were too tired to eat after their trip. There were so many eating tools around the plate, that we didn't know which to use. The staff must have thought that we were from the stone age as our army training hadn't included table etiquette. This hotel had been a meeting place for VIP's and royalty ever since the first World War but travel had come to a standstill so the place was leased to the Australian Government at present. The staff were not wise to the ways of Australians otherwise they would have had all the finery and glittering objects in cold storage before the boys arrived. They cottoned on a bit too late as by then much of the silver had been souvenired. Later when it was time to move out of Jerusalem and down to our camp at Gaza we were asked to check through our kitbags to find all those things that had found their way there by accident but really belonged to the hotel. The Sergeant Major lined us all up and said, "There is little doubt in my mind that most of the loot is already on its way to Australia, but the cost of the missing items will be taken from your pay". He said that he was not accusing us of stealing, but knew that we, like our fathers delighted in the pastime called "souveniring". Numerous items such as embroidered towels, pillow slips and sheets, light fittings, door numbers, door knobs, toilet fittings, "ladies" and "gent" signs had gone missing. In the army there is always something to break the monotony of routine.

After breakfast next morning we formed up in the street beside the hotel and marched to the Russian Compound which was the headquarters for the British Army. There we were given our orders for the day and the riot act was read to us, there were lots of "do not's". From there we marched off to our various duties. I was on guard duty at one of the headquarter buildings and I managed to get Ken posted to guard duty with me. So we were together once more. We spent two weeks at the hotel before other accommodation was found for us, mostly in old buildings. Once again we were sleeping on straw mattresses and eating army cooking. The army was beginning to move into top gear and we could see some signs of organisation about us. I don't know what the locals thought about us Aussies landing on them overnight and patrolling the streets. Four months later another large convoy brought tens of thousands more of us to the country and eventually a line of Australian Army camps stretched from Rehovot to Rafiah. We were given plenty of leave once our duties were finished for the day so we would roam the streets looking for souvenirs to send home and checking out the cafes and bars. It only took me a week to find a quiet cafe in Zion Square, where the owner spoke English and most of his customers were British Police Officers. Most Aussies bypassed this place, they were looking for more crowded places to drink in and the majority of them were beer drinkers. There were exceptions like myself who preferred a cup of tea in a quiet place after the noise of the mess and canteen.

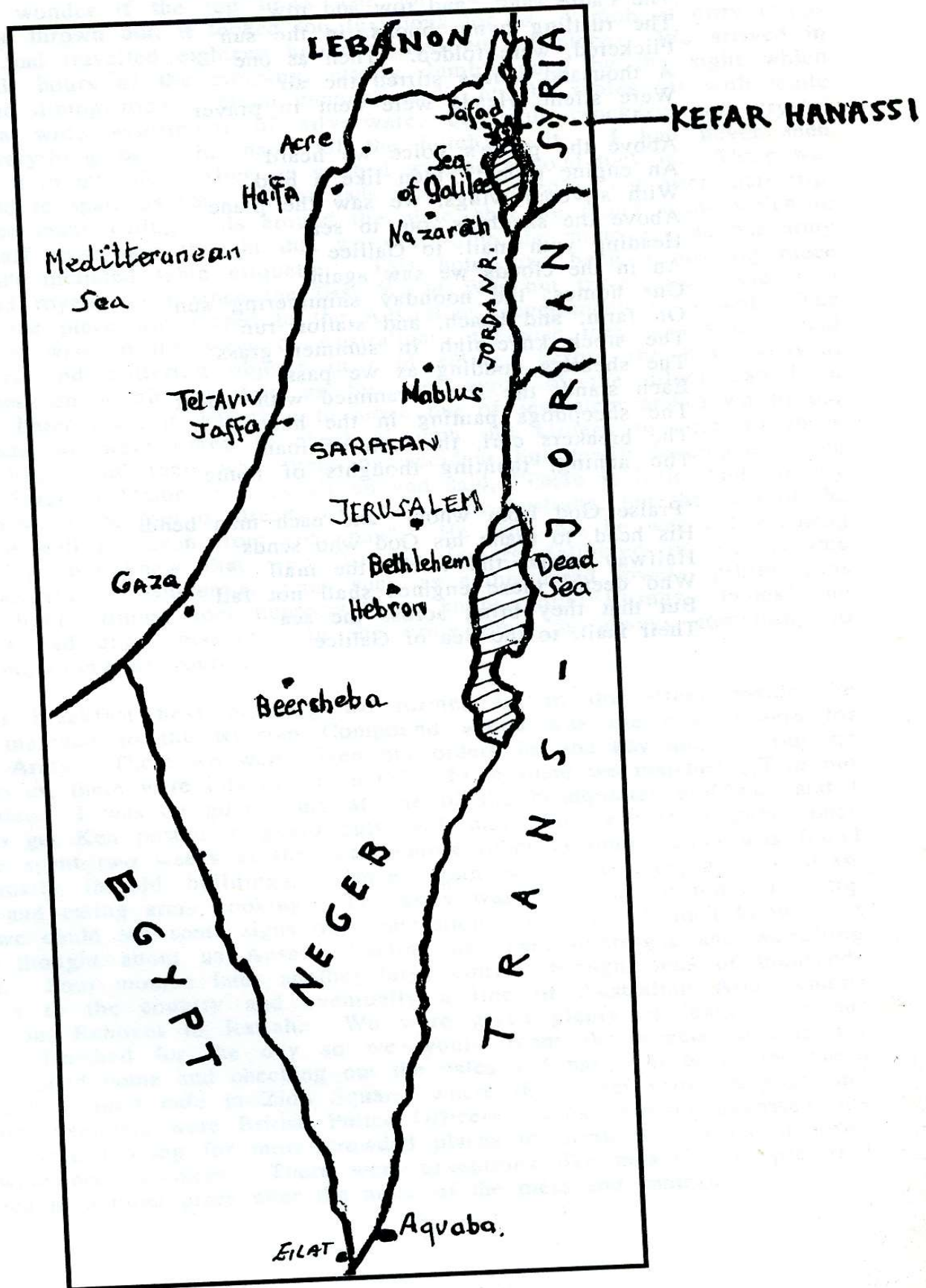
Airmail Palestine
By A.L. B.

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow"
The Padre said: and row and row
The rustling hymn books, in the sun
Flickered, were folded. Then as one
A thousand voices stirred the air -
Were silent. Heads were bent in prayer

Above the padre's voice we heard
An engine drone: then like a bird
With silvered wings, we saw the plane
Above the sandhills, out to sea
Heading with mail, to Galilee
And in the clouds we saw again
Our homes; the noonday shimmering sun
On farm, and beach, and station run
The stock knee-high in summer grass
The shearers nodding as we pass
Each stand; the silos crammed with wheat
The sheepdogs panting in the heat
The breakers curl, the lash of foam
The aching, taunting thoughts of home

"Praise God from whom" and each man bends
His head, to thank his God who sends
Halfway across the world, the mail
Who deems those engines shall not fail
But that they bring across the sea
Their mail, to the Sea of Galilee

BRITISH MANDATE PALESTINE



Hit and Run
By VX10351

Bright sunshine blazed upon the town
As people went their ways
And wandered idly up and down
Or shopped; like other days

So blue the sky, the children played
And laughed in childish fun
Caring not, and knowing not
Of clouds across the sun

Then silently from out of the blue
Came silvered wings on high
And stealthily they nearer drew
To hurtle from the sky

None saw them come no warning sound
Until the bombs fell clear
To deal destruction to the ground
From planes with nought to fear

I'll not forget the havoc wrought
Nor yet the grief, nor pain
Of folks bereft, of ones who sought
For loved ones yet in vain

How brave the crew, to clear the way
And calm the terror there
The "Aussies" too on leave that day
Were quick to do their share

All showed the courage nought can tame
The needy soon had care
And seeds were sown in friendships name
For the boys in "khaki" there

If this is war as havoc shows
I dread the day to see
When "Aussies" meet up with the foes
Who killed so wantonly

And Tel Aviv will be the call
Our minds shall see again
The days the Italians loose their bombs
And peaceful folks were slain

When Christmas Comes To Gaza

By Stuart Young A.I.F. 1940

King George will have his slice of pud in Dear Old London Town
With duck and peas and mild old cheese, and richest gravy brown
Adolf will feed in Heidelberg, and Musso in his Plaza
And I will find my joys, amongst the Boys, when Christmas comes to Gaza

We're going to have a mighty pud, with mils in lieu of trizzies
The ingredients were fetched from town, in a brace of 2 ton lizzies
We're sparing no expense at all, to get this party started
And to show Old blinking Hitler that gang still ain't down-hearted

At Christmas time the Bible says, we all should get together
And dance and sing and have our fling, despite the flaming weather
Twould grieve me so, if I should go, and find the unit sundered
So be in the van, and be a man, and fork out you two hundred

No doubt we'll miss, that wifely kiss, those little airs and graces
Those memories of dear old home, not even time enfaces
But still we have our pals with us, on this great enterprise
And friendship is a true great thing, no man can despise

We have even sent the pips a card "The Men will be at home"
Just to keep the old traditions up, and give the thing some tone
So roll up lads and join us, in giving Berlin the Razza
We're going to have a top hole time, when Christmas comes to Gaza

A Soldier's Secret Sgt's Mess

He grabbed me by my slender neck
I could not call or scream
He dragged me to his darkened tent
Where he could not be seen

He took me from my flimsy wrap
And gazed upon my form
I was so scared, so cold, so damp
And he delightfully warm

His fevered lips he pressed on mine
I gave him every drop
He took from me my very soul
I could not make him stop

He made me what I am today
That's why you find me here
A broken bottle thrown away
That once was full of beer.

Chapter 17

Esther

On my first couple of visits to the cafe I passed the time of day with the owner as the waitress knew little English and couldn't take my order. The waitress was away sick on my third visit, so there was a new face in the cafe, one which appealed to me very much. I am not usually in the habit of staring at people but his time, I couldn't keep my eyes off her and each time she turned my way, she caught me watching her. I tried to engage her in conversation when she came to my table but she told me that she could speak English but was not allowed to talk to customers, especially soldiers. This seemed strange to me at the time. The next time I saw her, I plucked up courage to ask her if she would meet me after work and she replied in a note that she would meet me after dark in the old Muslim cemetery on King George Street. I still had to do three hours guard duty and when I relieved Ken I told him about this girl and asked if he would come with me. He agreed, saying that if at last I was showing some interest in a girl, then she must be worthy of the inspection.

That night after a lot of inquiries and false directions we found the cemetery, thinking that it was a morbid place to meet a girl. We sat down on the wall and waited. It was already very dark and we checked out each girl that passed but without any luck. When two girls came along together, we didn't give them a second glance but a few minutes they returned and when level with us, one girl asked "Don't you know me?" I hadn't realised how small she was and her long, dark hair was combed out this time instead of under a scarf, so she looked quite different. She told me that we couldn't stay where we were and asked me to follow her in a few minutes to a nearby lane leading to a riding stable.

Ken wanted to know who the other girl was and why all the cloak and dagger business and although I didn't know I felt sure that the girls would explain. We caught up with them and introduced ourselves. The girl from the cafe was Esther, and her friend was Sarah. Esther was very shy and I was sure that she wouldn't have come without her friend, who wasn't shy at all. Sarah grabbed Ken's arm and wanted to see the city lights but Esther reminded her that she had promised to stay and be her alibi if her parents asked where she had been. She agreed to stay this once but never again in a place like this cemetery. Sarah didn't have to worry who she was seen with as her parents didn't care but Esther explained that her parents were Orthodox Jews and wouldn't approve of her being seen with a soldier especially if he was not of her faith. The Jewish girls who went out with soldiers were classed as prostitutes by their own people and were usually asked to leave home. Esther's parents only approved of her working in the cafe because her Uncle was the owner and then she was supposed to help out in the kitchen only when he was busy but not work as a waitress. Her Uncle was an easy going fellow and later we got on quite well together. He had a sharp eye, missing nothing of what was going on and he saw many soldiers come into his cafe. He mentioned to Esther one day that although most Aussies came to drink beer and make a lot of noise, one quiet soldier came only to drink tea or coffee while he read the paper and always left quickly.

The following night we met the girls in the same place. We learned that Esther had come from Poland, while Sarah from Yemen and while the horses shuffled around in the stables close by, we leant up against the wall and talked. Soon it was time for Esther to go as she had to be home early, but they promised to meet us again two nights later. Ken and Sarah were getting along fine and I could see that they wanted to go out on their own together.

The next day Esther decided to tell her uncle about us as she felt that she may need an ally in case her parents found out. He was quite understanding but he warned her to be very careful and not to be seen with me. When he found out that I wasn't Jewish he cautioned her not to become too deeply involved as no good could come of the relationship. "Aren't there plenty of nice Jewish boys in Jerusalem?" he asked. But she answered, "I like him very much."

Esther and I met again and this time I learnt about her family. She had a brother Asher, and a sister Rachel who had been living with her grandparents in America since childhood. Asher and Esther were very close, despite the usual disagreements and he was quite a bookworm as well as being interested in all the new films at the cinema.

Ken and Sarah soon declared that they wanted to make a round of the cafes on their own so Esther lost her alibi for going out at night so we arranged for her uncle to stay later in the cafe and claim that she was working later. Her parents were becoming suspicious and asking questions so we endeavoured to find another meeting place during the daytime.

I rearranged my guard duty so that I could catch an Arab bus to Bethlehem of an afternoon and wait for Esther to come on a following bus. Because this was an Arab area, none of her friends would see her there with me. I had to make sure that I arrived before her so she wouldn't have to wait by the roadside on her own as there was a lot of ill feeling between Jews and Arabs. Often we had to share the bus with goats, sheep, dogs and chickens but our arrangements were made easier because the Arab bus driver was ready to stop wherever a passenger wanted to get off. Esther showed a lot of courage as most Jewish girls wouldn't travel by themselves with a busload of Arabs. She showed this courage many times in later years. This was our first meeting in the daylight and we received our share of stares from passing cars and shepherds, but it was a pleasant change from meeting in dark alleyways. I had an old camera with me so before we had to return we met a shepherd boy who agreed for 200 mils to take our photo. Esther knew enough Arabic to explain what to do so I set the camera on a stone fence hoping that it was aimed correctly and not at our feet and when all was ready gave the boy a nod. This photo came out surprisingly well under the circumstances.

That day I realised that I was deeply in love with Esther and when I tried to tell her, she said, "You are trying to tell me something that I already know and I feel the same. I hope that you will stay here for a long time. I'll tell my uncle and hope he'll not be too upset." I was also quite prepared to talk to him. In the meantime, we would have to plan what to do about our future.

A few days later when I felt sure that Esther would have spoken to him, I plucked up enough courage to speak to her uncle. He noticed me as soon as I entered the cafe and came over to tell me that he would telephone his wife to take over so that we could go somewhere to talk freely. He took me to a cafe in Ben Yehuda Street where the owner knew Uncle Yitzchak and came over to take his order of two beers. I told him that I would prefer coffee but Yitzchak told me that when two men come together to talk serious business there is no better way than over a bottle of beer. He was very curious and wanted to know why I didn't drink beer so I told him that it was something to do with my childhood but it was too long a story to tell at present. Esther had already spoken to him about us and he was sure that we were in for a lot of trouble. His only solution to the problem was for me to transfer to some other place so that I might feel differently about her in time. I replied that I wanted Esther and hoped that we could get married if that is what she wanted. "Everything depends on Esther," he said, "Her parents aren't going to like this and they will do everything in their power to stop you." Firstly her parents will have to be

told and this will be a great shock to them. You both come from different religions and backgrounds, furthermore, as a soldier in wartime, only God knows where you will be next week." My answer was that I knew only one thing, and that was, I wanted to get this settled as soon as possible and nothing would make me change my mind. He sighed and said, "Well, I will have to find a suitable time to break the news to Esther's parents and I will let you know what develops as soon as I can."

At this critical stage in my life I was faced with yet another problem. We were told that we would probably be moving to one of the new training camps as it would be ready in a couple of weeks time. The new camp was near Gaza so it would mean a four hour journey to Jerusalem.

A few nights later when I went to the cafe, I was told to go to Uncle Yitzchak's house which was nearby. On arrival I found that Esther was there also. Yitzchak informed me that he had seen her parents and that they were stunned by the news of our relationship. They said that they would sooner see her dead than married to me and refused to talk any more about it. Yitzchak suggested that it would be better to leave them alone for a while to give them time to grasp the situation fully and to think about it. I was afterwards invited to stay and have supper with the family.

I managed to see Esther alone later to plan a way of keeping in contact when I moved to Gaza. The waitress at the Zion Cafe would be our confidant and through her, we could exchange letters. I decided to approach the second in command, Major Walsh who had been a soldier in the First World War and was a kind, fatherly type who would lend his ear to any boys who had problems. I felt sure of a sympathetic hearing. After going through the proper channels, the time came for the interview. I told him what was troubling me and he replied, "Private Whitham, did you come here to tell me that some Jewish girl had ruffled your feathers? Where were you when the warning was given out about becoming involved with local girls at that first parade after your arrival in Palestine?" The realization hit me that he already knew about my relationship with Esther even before I told him. The Major's source of information turned out to be one of the boys in our unit. He kept his ears wide open for every little bit of gossip concerning the men and lost no time in passing it on to the Major. The Major didn't think that he could help me with my problem as Esther was under age so without her parent's written consent we couldn't do anything. I enquired about Esther's position if we were able to marry. He had seen my file which showed that I had made an allotment of half my pay to my mother as my next of kin. He advised me that I would have to make another allotment to my wife and this would be a heavy burden to carry. Also Esther's family would have to be investigated for security reasons before arrangements could be made. If we were able to marry legally, Esther would become a British Subject. The Major later became my courier and delivered my letters to Esther. He advised me to see the army chaplain who might be able to find some answers to my dilemma. After seeing the chaplain I was left feeling more confused than before.

My mind was made up so that night I left a note asking Esther to meet me in the park the following evening. As her parents now knew about me there was no point in hiding anymore. We took a bus to Bethlehem and while walking the streets I shared with her the results of my talks with the Major and the Chaplain. Esther asked, "Why don't you ask the army Rabbi, he may be able to marry us quickly?" So I aimed to do just that as soon as possible. Our relationship was now out in the open and she wanted to clear things up and leave Jerusalem to live somewhere else in order not to hurt her parents any more than she could help.

We couldn't see one another for a while as the unit was busy packing up everything to move. By October we were setting up our new camp near Gaza and I finally arranged an appointment to see the Rabbi. He listened to what I had to say and said, "Young man, you are the first to come to me with this specific problem and you must realize that I have to go by Army regulations. There are sure to be other cases similar to yours if we remain in Palestine for any length of time. I must be sure that any advice I give doesn't create a precedent. I am sure that no Rabbi would become mixed up in such a situation." So there was no help coming from that direction so I took the first bus to Jerusalem on my first day off (it took about four hours) and together, Esther and I went to the Scottish Church outside the Old City. The Minister seemed to be a kindly man, he listened patiently to what we had to say but at the finish he shook his head sadly and said that he would like to help but was unable to do so. His only advice was for us to win over Esther's parents and come to an understanding with them. This was another dead end and we were back to square one.

I thought about the Salvation Army, but didn't think that they dabbled in that line of things and probably couldn't help. I have a high regard for the Salvo's because of the help they gave the poor during the Depression and for what they did for the soldiers during the war. Wherever the troops were, there were Salvo's huts giving out reading and writing material, helping people with their problems back home, no matter from what religion. On route marches and manoeuvres they were always there with a cheery word, cigarettes or chewing gum and their pockets were always full of sweets. After night manoeuvres, the boys could always rely on a hot drink from them before turning into their bunks. There was never any charge for all these services.

We returned to Uncle Yitzchak's place, told him that we had had no luck and pressed him again to try and see Esther's parents to see if there was any change in their attitude. He agreed and would take some reinforcements with him as he was not without influence in Jerusalem. He would choose people who got on well with the family. He was anxious to see an end to the affair and felt that the best solution was for us to marry. Unfortunately I couldn't speak Hebrew as he would have taken me with him to see Esther's parents. Hopefully, he and his friends would break the deadlock. I had to leave it at that and catch the last bus back to camp leaving my address with Esther, in case there was any news. On returning to camp, I saw Major Walsh to inform him what had happened to date. He said that he would be going himself to Jerusalem in a few day's time on Army business (it was suspected that he had a girlfriend of his own there) and would deliver the letter for me. It happened that he had a long talk with Yitzchak and gave him to understand that he wanted some action to get things moving as there was no way of knowing how long our unit would be in this country. The Major wanted this business finalised quickly and a week later I received a message from Esther asking me to come to Jerusalem as soon as possible, preferably with one of the Officers as she had some news and her uncle wanted a conference of all parties concerned. He had arranged to use a friend's office and had prepared some answers for any questions that might arise. I passed the note through to the Major's office for him to read and after studying it, he agreed that this could be a break and planned to consult the Commanding Officer to put him in the picture and to arrange leave for both of us. Up until that time, the only contact that I had had with the C.O. was on the parade ground where he always appeared to be a stiff and regimental type. I doubted if I would get a positive response from him and didn't look forward to being called into his office. So, I was not at all happy the following day when I was paraded there to face him and I was quite nervous standing before him. I was left standing for a while, the C.O. was sitting at his desk. Suddenly he looked up and saw me standing like a statue and he didn't look as stern as he was on the parade ground. When he spoke, I relaxed and he gave me permission to sit down as this was a private

talk and not a court martial. He asked me to tell him in as brief a way as I could all that had happened up to this date, so I did. At the end of my story he told me that he would be going to Jerusalem the next day, calling at Sarafand Depot on his way and would be a few hours in Jerusalem. I was to go with him when he left in the morning. He wanted to see the girl who was causing all the fuss also he wanted to have a say in what was happening to one of his troops. To my surprise, he said that he was not totally ignorant of the Hebrew language. The next day would be quite an interesting one.

The trip next morning was much better and quicker than any made in an Arab bus which called at every village along the road. We arrived in Jerusalem at lunchtime, the driver parked at the Russian Compound and while the C.O. went off to have lunch, the driver and I walked to Uncle Yitzchak's cafe. He came over to get our order and gave me the address in Ben Yehuda Street for our meeting later. I informed him that my C.O. would accompany me so he made a few phone calls to finalise arrangements for the conference. After lunch we met the C.O. and walked to the address given and went upstairs to the office which looked like it belonged to a stock broker or lawyer. Hershah, a friend of the family, Uncle Yitzchak, Esther, myself and the C.O. sat around the table, with Esther between the C.O. and me so that she could translate for us. He preferred not to let them know of his knowledge of Hebrew and concentrated on studying Esther as she talked.

Chapter 18

The Breakthrough

At this conference we were informed that Uncle Yitzchak had been to see Esther's parents and after a lengthy debate, they had decided on a compromise on three conditions. Firstly, I had to convert to Judaism, secondly that the marriage take place anywhere in Palestine but not in Jerusalem, thirdly Esther had to leave Jerusalem and not return. These conditions may have sounded harsh but under the circumstances we understood, as her parents would suffer great embarrassment and distress if we stayed in Jerusalem. Esther and I were asked to go into the waiting room to discuss these conditions and to make a decision before we returned to the office. I was concerned that she was being asked to leave her home and all it meant to her as well as lose all her friends with no turning back. I was not so worried about myself. Esther told me that she had saved money that her uncle had paid her and I could help till her army allowance came through. It would be a struggle but she felt sure that her Auntie would help out if needed. We returned to the office to tell them that it was all settled and we were going through with it. Apparently they had started talking like old friends while we were out and had anticipated our answer. Yitzchak asked us not to go about openly in Jerusalem yet but to be discreet. First I would have a "Brit" (circumcision) at the Hadassa Hospital in Jerusalem and enquiries had already been made for me. When I asked Esther what a brit was, she asked the C.O. to explain. I shuddered when I heard and she said that it was not too late to change my mind but I told her that it was too late the first day that I saw her. I thought that it was a small price to pay considering what she had to agree to. It was arranged that the marriage take place at Ramat Gan near Tel-Aviv and the conversion to Judaism in Jerusalem.

Everyone had been busy on our behalf, Hershal was definitely a live wire who seemed to have all the answers and knew how to get things done. The C.O. wasn't sure of the procedure regarding marriages such as ours as this was the first of this type for him. Nevertheless he would arrange the necessary leave and papers when required. The C.O. declined Yitzchak's offer of a drink at the cafe as it was out of bounds to officers so the driver and I went off to have a beer and wait while he had a talk with Esther. That was the first time I really enjoyed a beer. I could tell that the driver was quite bored having to hang around waiting so much that day, not knowing what was in the wind. Drivers can usually smell out what is going on and it gives them something to gossip about later. What vexed him most was that he didn't know what I, a lowly private, was doing in the staff car. It was a very quiet drive back to camp as I had a lot to think about and obviously the C.O. wouldn't answer any questions in front of the driver. I was much happier knowing that things were moving at last and hoped that we wouldn't be leaving Gaza till it was all over and there wasn't any more holdups.

One day in camp I overheard one of the boys talking about a family in Rehovot who he had become friendly with and he often spent his leave with them. This family had spent some time on the goldfields in Western Australia before coming to live in Palestine. I asked him to enquire if there were any empty rooms around there and he agreed to enquire for me on his next leave. On his return he said that I was lucky as this family had a spare room but wanted to meet the person wanting it first. I planned to arrange a visit as soon as I could. It wasn't long before I received a letter from Esther telling me that arrangements had all been made with the hospital and that I should be prepared to stay six days and come on the date planned. She would meet me at the cafe and take us in a taxi as it was quite a long way. The C.O. gave me a pass for ten days but said, "Don't use it all if you don't need to, as I'm sure that you will need more later on before this is finalised. I have had some forms made

out for you to sign as this is not a routine matter and it is necessary to cover myself. The contents are simply that you are entering hospital for private medical treatment and that the Australian Government will not be responsible financially or otherwise and that you personally accept that this treatment is not due to war service." These papers are probably still buried in the dungeons in Melbourne Army Headquarters gathering dust.

I arrived in Jerusalem a day early as Esther's Aunty had invited me to stay overnight and next morning Esther and I went by taxi to the hospital on Mount Scopus. She helped me to fill in all the necessary papers and left saying that she would be back in a few days. I had trouble talking to anyone but I found an American doctor to talk to so didn't feel so lost. This hospital was so modern and had a fantastic view overlooking the whole of Jerusalem and I was treated very well and fussed over. Apparently I was the only soldier there. Esther didn't come to visit me for four days as she decided to take the opportunity to go to Rehovot and see about the room. She was very happy as they were nice folk and wanted her to stay right away. She thought that it was better to tell them what was happening rather than trying to keep it from them and eventually finding out. The husband wanted her to stay longer to listen to all his stories about the goldfields. Uncle Yitzchak and Hershal came to collect me from the hospital and told me that they were taking me to see a couple of Rabbis at the Ritual Bath-House and I would have to stay there three days as there was a lot to do and little time to do it in. They were in a hurry to get us married as soon as possible but this pressure was coming from Esther's parents. One thing was a worry to Hershal, how were they going to get me through the day with tattoos on my arm. When I told them that one tattoo was put on by an Arab artist in the Old City, we headed straight there to see if this "artist" could remove his handiwork. The Arab picked up a knife for an answer and said that a doctor could do it but it takes a long time. Time we didn't have, but all of a sudden, Hershal lit up a like a light, said something to Yitzchak and we hurried off to his home where Aunty was asked to bring bandages. Soon he had my arm bandaged up as good as a first aid nurse would do. He didn't know what Jewish law said about tattooing but what it represented was the problem. From there we hurried to the ritual baths and after much talking I was told to get undressed and put on a robe. One of the rabbis wanted to know what the bandage was for and when uncle explained that I had a sore there and didn't want it to start bleeding, this started a row between them but eventually they calmed down and they indicated for me to get into the bath. I could see that one of the bewhiskered gentlemen was not very happy so he rushed things through to get me out of there. Uncle Yitzchak dropped me off at the bus depot so that I could get back to camp and Esther would let me know when I was needed again. I felt like I was being treated like a little boy to come and go when they told me to but they certainly knew the ropes and I would never have got through without them.

I returned to camp like a docile lamb to await the shepherd's call to return. A few days later I received a letter from my mate, Ken who had been transferred to another unit and was only a few kilometres up the road at another training camp called Biet Jirga, named after an Arab village nearby. On the first night that I could get away I went to see him, catching a ride on a military transport, not knowing whether he would be in camp. I needn't have had any fears as after enquiring around I finally found him in the guardhouse doing ten days. He hadn't been playing ball with the army. This wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last either. I was allowed to see him for an hour and found out why he was looking so forlorn. A week before he had a leave pass to go to Tel Aviv where he had arranged to meet Sarah. He only had a 24 hour pass but she didn't turn up at the appointed spot. This was the second time that she had disappointed him so he got himself stoned and stayed that way for three days until the M.P.'s picked him up and brought him back to camp. He was charged with being A.W.O.L. He asked about Esther and how

things were going so I brought him up to date with all the arrangements and told him that we were only waiting for them to arrange the date for the wedding. He said that it would be much easier for him and Sarah if they could only hit it off alright instead of always fighting. He still was very keen on her but didn't know whether to try and see her again as his C.O. had warned him that he would be dealt with more severely if he was brought before him once again. I had kept in touch with Ken's family since leaving Australia as he wasn't a good letter writer and they looked to me to keep them informed. I don't know whether they believed everything I told them since they must have realized that he was no angel and I only told them the good things and left out the rest. I occasionally received a parcel from Ken's family and Auntie Laura religiously sent me a parcel every month for the six years that I was away. They were filled with cakes, biscuits, nuts and chocolate and I used to look forward to this treat. These parcels were very much appreciated and came by sea mail, arriving five or six weeks after posting. Airmail letters only took three or four days. Mail was sent by seaplane via India to the sea of Galilee. From there the mail boys would be waiting to rush it to Base, where it was sorted and distributed to the camps. They worked around the clock to see that the boys got their mail in the shortest time.

During the period of waiting I began to meet Esther in Tel Aviv instead of Jerusalem. I now wrote to her through the regular mail channels to let her know when I could see her, usually once a fortnight. I went absent without leave twice to see her and luckily didn't get caught. After we were married I once went absent without leave to see her in Rehovot at night, intending to return to camp at midnight but the air-raid sirens started about ten o'clock. They were trying to sink a boat that had gone aground carrying illegal refugees and been abandoned - what a waste. I then decided to stay with Esther overnight and left early the next morning just on daybreak. I was hitchhiking back to camp so when I saw a truck coming, I flagged it down but got a shock when it stopped as it contained Military Police. The driver jumped down and asked, "Where are you going to, soldier?" and I replied that I was going to Gaza. He opened the gate to the "cage" at the back and said, "I can give you a lift if you don't mind joining the boys in here. There's no fight left in them as most of them are drunk anyway." I hopped in and he slammed the gate and locked it behind me. He stopped many times along the road, handing his prisoners over to the guards at each camp. Finally he arrived at my camp and let me out, saying, "It was a bit cramped in there but I hope you have arrived in time." He assumed that I had a pass. It would have been a very different story if he had asked to see it!

When Esther moved to Rehovot things were easier because it was closer than Tel Aviv. It was at this time that I got my first taste of kibbutz life. Esther had exams to take so wouldn't be able to see me for a while so I went on two Sundays to a Kibbutz near Petach Tikva together with about thirty boys in a couple of trucks to help out with orange picking and other jobs. The kibbutzim were having a hard time as many of their men had joined the Jewish Brigade attached to the British Army and were away fighting. This left them short of labour and to make matters worse, the war limited the market for their fruit which left them short of money. The boys volunteered to help out. On arrival, the women showed us which jobs that they wanted help with so we divided into groups. One group picked oranges, another cleaned out the cowshed while another group offered to look after and amuse the kids leaving the women to get on with the laundry, cooking and other domestic chores. I noticed that the kids had nothing to play with so after the second week I dropped out and stayed in camp to spend all my spare time making toys for them out of wooden boxes from the Quartermaster's store. I scrounged a meat saw from the cook and used the head of my bayonet for a hammer. I couldn't get any paint so I had to send what I'd made out with the boys unpainted. Many of the boys became very attached to the children and would encourage them to play during their meal

break. Of course, the popular game had to be Aussie Rules football. The boys used to encourage the army camps to buy the oranges that they picked and would bring back bags of them each time they went to the kibbutz and try to sell them in the camp. The price that they asked was higher than the price paid for the oranges bought from the Arab boys who haunted the camps selling their wares but after being told that these oranges were very sweet, very clean and picked by their own hands, they forked out the money. On their return to the kibbutz on the following Sunday, they handed the money over to the treasurer.

Little did I know that in later years, I would be living in a kibbutz myself.

The Friendly Gums
By Spr. A.W. Hahn. NX32876

When first we came to Palestine a stranger's land we saw
But friendly gums were waiting with a welcome on the shore
From Haifa down to Khassa, when some trees came into view
long the road, there always seemed to be a gum or two.

We found a spot where soldiers sleep just outside Gaza town
On heroes of our father's time the friendly gums look down
We feel our courage growing when we stand beneath such trees
Whose roots are firmly planted in the dust of men like these.

Tobruk had little greenery, a tree was pretty rare
But, in what once had been the town, we found some odd ones there
And through a crazy shell hole in my badly battered room
I glimpsed the creamy beauty of a friendly gum in bloom.

The cedars up in Lebanon grow old in majesty
And fair romances oft began beneath an olive tree
But the sweetest sight in Lebanon no soldier will dispute
Was the avenue of friendly gums that led him to Beirut.

We hurried o'er the Sinai, and in Egypt found them too
Along the canal and river banks we saw them wave us through
Past Cairo and past Alex, still the friendly gums were seen
Until we reached the barren lands that led to Alamein.

Another day, another land, were moving on once more
And watching lines of waving palms along New Guinea's shore
Our landing made, we start another home on Huon Bay
And find another friendly gum to welcome us in Lae.

The show goes on. There may be other parts where we must roam
So let us hope in each strange land we meet his friend from home
And like the lads in Gaza, at the end, if it should come
May we find rest as they did underneath a friendly gum.

Chapter 19

A Wedding Without Tears

One Sunday, after Esther had moved to Rehovat, we decided to spend the day in Tel Aviv. It turned out to be an exciting one! On arrival at the bus stop, we found a group of approximately eighteen Gurkas from an Indian Unit vainly trying to make themselves understood by the locals. All they received were shrugs of shoulders. One Gurka, who could speak some English asked us where we were going, and being told Tel Aviv, they all decided to come too. Just then, the Tel Aviv bus arrived, almost full, and after we boarded, the Indian fellows followed us. They were everywhere, inside, on the bonnet, on the roof rack, on the ladder at the back of the bus, the mudguards and the doorway. The driver started yelling his head off and refused to move until they got off. The English speaking Gurka proclaimed himself the leader and enquired what the driver was saying so the driver, seeing that we could speak to them asked Esther to tell them to get off the bus but they wouldn't budge as this was the way they rode buses at home. The driver wouldn't listen to explanation but kept shouting at Esther.

She was really upset by now and retorted that these people were not savages as he called them but human beings and were here in Palestine just like all the other troops to see that it didn't become another Poland. "If you have so many passengers," she said, "please ring the bus station for another bus, it's only just down the road." After enquiring to find out what she was saying, they started cheering and clapping and two of their men picked up the driver, placed him back into his seat and indicated to him that they wanted the wheels turning. These Gurkas must have frightened him as they looked so fierce dressed up in their uniform, wearing a large turban and sporting beards and moustaches. Around their waist was a large sash and in this they carried a knife and a sword. As soon as we got underway, they all started singing and the driver had problems seeing the road as the chap sitting on the bonnet was rocking from side to side as he sang. The driver only muttered and kept driving and we noticed that he didn't try to collect their fares.

Much to our embarrassment, they called Esther their leader so they all waited for us to get off the bus and when told that we were going shopping, they said, "we come too". I tried to discourage them "But no", they said, "We come too", so as we started walking down the street, they followed us in single file. When we entered a shop they all squatted on the footpath til we came out again and continued following us to the next stop. We must have looked a sight with 5 foot high Esther leading this troop of 6 foot high Gurkas around the streets. I whispered a suggestion to her that we call into a little cafe and tell them that we were going to eat, and they might look for a place themselves. On Allenby Street we found a place but when we went in, they all pushed in with us. There were only four small tables and eight chairs, but when they filled up, the rest squatted on the floor against the wall. The waitress appeared and explained that she only served drinks but if they wanted food, there was plenty of bread and she could boil some eggs, so the leader replied, "Eggs, bread and black beer for everyone". The waitress had a lot of trouble moving through all the legs covering the floor and I began to feel ill at the thought of this combination of food despite eating army food. Esther told me to say nothing and do our best not to offend them as they seemed eager to be friendly. They were very polite, one took the loaded tray from the girl and served us first before his mates. It took six trips to bring all the food and drink and they sat and waited till we started to eat before they took a bite. At the end of this meal each of them shook the waitresses' hand and we could see that it was an ordeal for her. But they left her tips amounting to more than a month's wages.

Out in the street again they once more followed us in single file. All the locals stopped to stare, this was the first time that they had seen Gurkas, we found out later that this was their first leave. I suggested to their leader that we should stop and decide what we were going to do for the rest of the day so he called the rest of his men to a halt and they squatted in a circle on the footpath, forcing the people to walk around them on the road. We informed them that Esther and I were going to get a photo taken then we were going shopping but as the shops were too small we couldn't all fit inside. I asked them to be good boys and find some amusement for themselves but the only response was, "We come too". So down the street we trooped till we came to the photographer in a tiny little shop. They all squatted down outside to wait and Esther asked the photographer if there was any other way out. Luckily he said that there was a way through his dark room to a small lane so after the photo was taken and our deposit paid we escaped out that way and for the rest of the day kept away from that part of town.

At about four in the afternoon we returned to the bus station for our return to Rehovat and then my return to camp but lo and behold, there were all our Indian friends lined up waiting also. They were so happy to see us. The first bus had almost stopped when the driver recognised our friends so he just accelerated and got away from there fast so we had to wait for another bus. It was the same driver from that morning, once was enough for him! There was plenty of room on the next bus so there was no problems and on arrival in Rehovat the Gurkas accompanied us to where Esther was staying, said their goodbyes and off they went.

The following week she returned to Rehovat with all her belongings and not long after this I received a call to pick up Esther and together we should go to the same office in Jerusalem where we had had our conference as the wedding had been arranged.

I was to bring civilian clothes with me as I couldn't marry in uniform but when I mentioned this to the Major, he told me that it was not on. Standard orders forbade the wearing of civvies while on active service overseas and anyone found doing so would be court martialled as a deserter. In any case, where could I find civilian clothes at such short notice?

So off I went in uniform to Jerusalem. I only had a leave pass for 48 hours so I hoped that there wouldn't be any holdups. After arrival, Esther got involved in preparations so I had nothing better to do than to wander round the city. Next morning together with six other people, we travelled in two cars to Ramat Gan, a little to the north of Tel Aviv where the wedding was to take place. One of Esther's friends was to meet us there. When we met the Rabbis, they said, "No marriage will take place while this man is in uniform", so the men adjourned outside for a conference to decide which of them would be able to get some clothes for me. One of the men who lived nearby went off and was away about an hour before he returned with a suit, shirt and tie. I was then ushered into a small room to change into a suit which had a coat that two people would have fitted into and sleeves that came halfway between my wrists and elbows. What an appalling sight! When Esther saw me she couldn't help laughing and that made matters worse for me. I had suffered so many indignities because of this marriage and so I wondered how many more were still to come. Having solved the problem of my clothes, we now found that we were one person short. Jewish law requires that there be ten men at a wedding, so Uncle Yitzchak headed outside and soon returned with a passing taxi driver who had been paid well to attend. The rest of the wedding thankfully went off without a hitch and I was soon able to change back into my uniform. We then proceeded to the Balalika Beer Cellars where a meal was waiting for us and everyone started to make merry. I had to drink to numerous toasts and my glass kept getting filled up again so I finished up that night



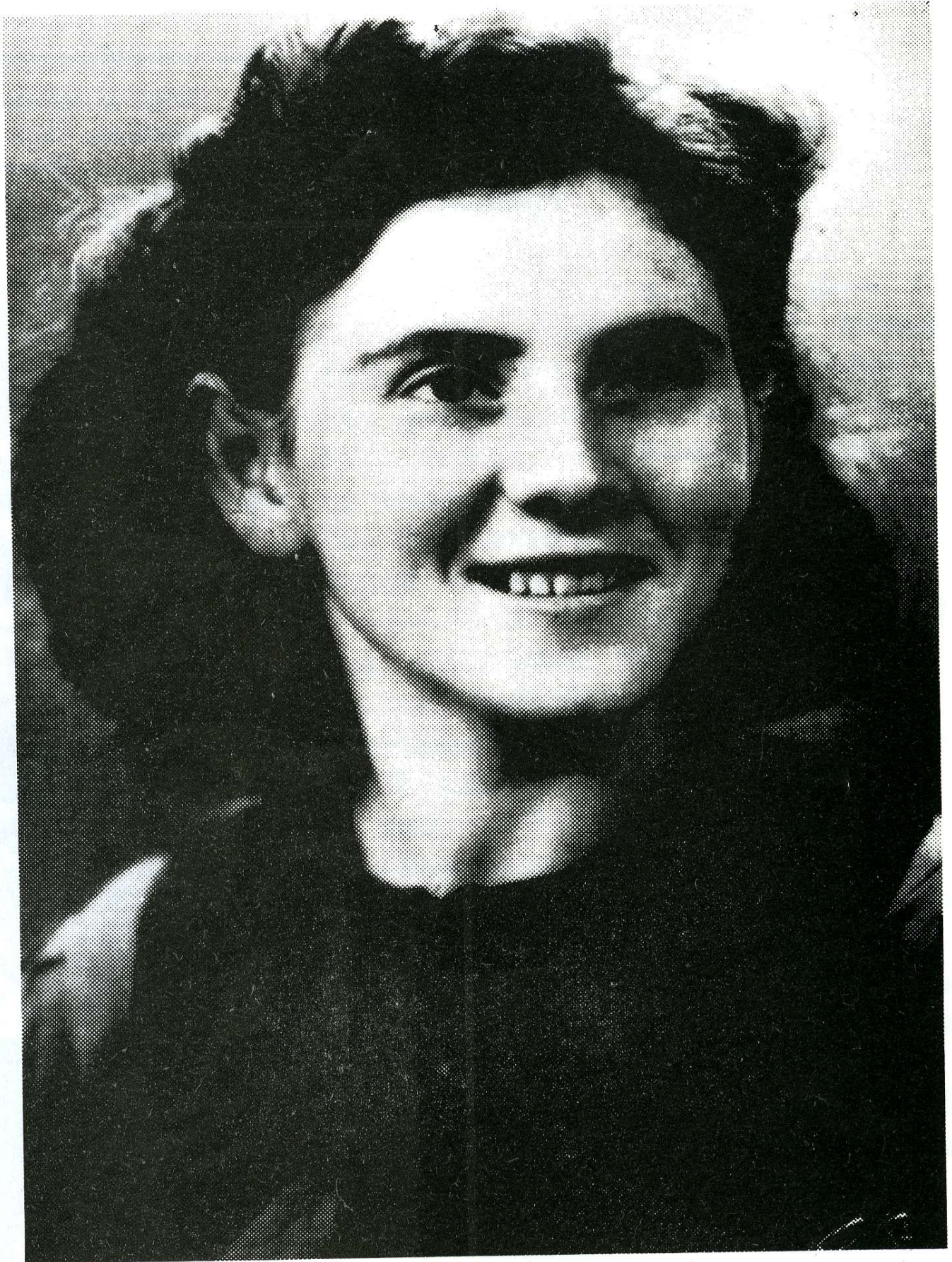
THE WIFE OF SERGEANT WHITHAM, still serving overseas, who arrived in Australia recently with their baby son, David, the first baby of an Australian Soldier to be born in Palestine. Mrs Whitham, who is a Pole, and Sergeant Whitham were married in Palestine.





Jim & Esther - Bethlehem - 1940

Esther - Early 1940's



quite tipsy. We had been booked into a hotel for the night and the rest of the party returned to Jerusalem. All the complicated arrangements for this unusual day had been made by a family friend who lived in Ramat Gan.

The next morning we walked around Tel Aviv, visited the Zoo and filled in the rest of the day till it was time to get back to camp before my leave pass expired. On arrival back at camp, I found that while I was away my promotion to sergeant had been posted on the noticeboard. This made me very happy as it meant that Esther would have enough money and I could still keep the allotment going to my mother.

That night I was invited into the Sergeant's Mess for a double celebration. Firstly for the promotion and secondly for my marriage. The canteen was almost dry and waiting for supplies so they hunted up anything that was left, mostly Creme de Menthe, six bottles of it, together with some soda and lemonade. That was quite a party! The Creme de Menthe was called "Starboard Light" because of its green colour but I saw many other colours as well as green that night. When I got out of bed the next morning and had a drink of water, it hit me again and it took about three days to get the Creme de Menthe out of my system. During that time my head turned cartwheels every time that I had a drink of water.

Within a week the unit moved out so I didn't see Esther again for quite a while. When we returned to this area, I was stationed in another camp close by and was again able to visit her. She was getting along fine and didn't mind being on her own but I am sure that she missed her parents. Later, after David, our first baby had been born (named after my father), her parents came to visit with her brother, Asher. This was the first time I was able to meet Esther's parents and we were able to make peace with one another and we got along fine. After meeting me, they realized that even though I wore a uniform, I could still make a good husband and despite all the obstacles that they had put in our way, they now knew that I was not going to run away and leave her. They were so pleased about the arrival of their first grandchild and this was the first of many visits they paid to Rehovat.

Gaza

Travelling back and forwards to Rehovot took up so much of my leave time that it was hardly worth travelling all that way for just a couple of hours, so Esther decided to try and find a place to stay in Gaza where she could be closer to my camp. Although this was against all her friend's advice she was insistent as she wanted us to have more time together. All the Jews had left Gaza and in it lived an all Arab population so it would be dangerous for her to live there on her own.

I met Esther one day as she alighted from a bus in Gaza and we asked around for a room. One Arab boy said that he knew where to find one so he trotted off and we followed him through a lot of back alleys till we came to a walled in courtyard where he started to sing. When I asked him why he sang, he replied that it was to let the women know that a man was approaching and give them time to cover their faces. The gate opened and Esther was allowed in while I was asked to wait outside. Inside the courtyard people were sitting around and in the centre was a well from which they drew their water. Facing the well was a semi-circle of rooms, one of which they showed to Esther. It was empty except for a mattress on the floor which would be for her but when they discovered that I would be visiting her occasionally, they didn't want to talk about it anymore. I paid off the boy who had taken us there then Esther came out to explain that it was no go.

We wandered back up to the main street again and while we were walking, a small boy attached himself to us and followed along. He had heard us speaking in English so after a short time, he asked if we were looking for something. I explained that I was looking for a room for my wife and he replied that he knew everything about Gaza. He wasn't exaggerating one bit. I enquired how old he was and he said twelve and added that his father was a Turk and his mother, Abyssinian. He was jet black and said that his name was Rami, but because of his colour, I called him "Midnight" which he seemed to like very much. He heard Esther call me Jim, so he called me Sergeant Jim and Esther, Mrs Jim. He showed us a building called the Al Farah Hotel, which meant the "House of Weddings". In reality it looked like a three story building that had just been through the blitz, there was not a single sheet of glass in any of the windows, only bars, wire mesh and a bag to hang over the window each night. None of the doors had locks; there was no heating or running water so I said, "Esther, you can't stay here, this is the end of the line and I don't think that it would be safe here". She said that she would try it for a while so we went in to see the owner and Midnight did all the talking. The old fellow in the hotel seemed to have a lot of respect for the boy and eventually showed us up to the third floor climbing the stairs on the outside of the building. On the top floor there was an open area with four rooms leading from it. One was a large, empty room but completely bare and this was what he was offering. After a lot of haggling between Midnight and the owner, it was settled and Esther would return the next day with her things to move in.

Midnight said that he would help her. He said, "My mother and I will come back later, clean the room and have it ready for you". He was willing to work for Esther so I asked him what wages he wanted and the sum mentioned was practically nothing. When I offered him more he would not take it, insisting only on the amount that he asked for. "That's not enough to live on", I told him but he said that he made plenty of money at night time so I asked him what he did at night. He said that when a soldier wanted to drink whiskey, arak or wine, he took him, when a soldier wanted a woman, he took him. He added that he also sold chocolates, peanuts, etc, in the cinema. During the day he would take Mrs Jim to the market to buy food. He knew everyone there;

those who cheated and those who were honest. "I show her the best places to buy anything she needs", he said. There was a ten o'clock curfew then so every night when the show was over and the soldiers returned to camp, he came back and slept outside Esther's door on a rug and blanket. He was her guardian angel. She rarely saw him as he came late and left early the next morning to go home for breakfast. He wouldn't eat anything that Esther cooked for him but if he happened to be there at meal time, he would take what he wanted and cook it himself. He stayed with her for all of the six months that she lived in Gaza. If she wanted to go out on her own, he would babysit my son David. He became indispensable.

One of the problems Esther encountered in Gaza, was the fact that the locals assumed that anything left outside a house was public property, and fair picking for them. This lesson she learned in the first few days. One morning she washed her clothes and hung them out the front of her room to dry. Later she started cooking some prunes on her small kerosene cooker but the kerosene fumes became too much for her so she shifted the stove outside, checking from time to time to see how the prunes were getting on. Esther saw two boys hanging around but didn't take much notice of them. The next time she went to inspect her prunes, she found, to her dismay, that the pot was still boiling, but the prunes were all gone and so were the two boys. So Esther found that she had to keep the stove inside and suffer the fumes. When Midnight arrived, she told him what had happened. He said, "OK, everything you leave outside, anybody can take." Esther replied, "Well then, I must go and bring in my washing immediately." But she was spared that task, because when she opened the door, she saw, to her horror that the line was bare! Esther knew from that time on, to keep her belongings INSIDE the room, and even if the door was unlocked, all her possessions would be safe. My camp was six miles away but I was able to come and see her once a week. Each time I saw Esther she had some new experience to relate. Luckily we didn't have any goats, donkeys or chickens as it would have been a squeeze inside that room!

One Saturday I arrived when Midnight and Esther were setting off to do the shopping and I noticed that he never wore boots, so I gave him some money to buy himself a pair of boots but he was most offended and gave the money back, saying that he had boots and later on he would bring them to show me. That very afternoon he returned, proudly carrying over his shoulder a new pair of boots tied together by the laces. "See, Sergeant Jim, I have boot", he said but when I asked why he didn't wear them, he explained that they were too good for Gaza but one day when he went to Tel Aviv, he would wear them. I never tried to offend him again by offering him anything else. He became very attached to Esther and would do anything for her but he would not accept anything from her apart from his few shillings each week. He said that he earnt enough from his night trade with the soldiers as he knew the nicest girls for them. When he took Esther shopping, if anyone tried to cheat her he would yell so loudly that all the market would hear and know what the chap had tried to do.

We never knew if anyone suspected that Esther was Jewish but if they did, they kept it to themselves. She was the only woman from outside Gaza living there. She spoke only English at all times, never Hebrew or Arabic of which she knew a little. Some evenings we would go for a walk to a small coffee shop about two miles away, sit for a while and then head for home. We always knew that we were being followed as we could see men lurking in the shadows any time we stopped, but they always left us alone and kept their distance. Soldiers were ordered to move around in threes or fours after dark and by ten o'clock everyone must be out of the Gaza area. After that time, only the Military Police on patrol were to be seen there picking up the strays.

The Australian Government had built a canteen in Gaza which was called Blamey House, after General Blamey, the Commander of the Australian Forces in the Middle East. Esther was given a permanent pass to eat there at anytime, paying the same cost for a small meal as the troops and she came to know many of the soldiers and the staff who were mainly Arab. Occasionally I would bring a friend to eat there with Esther and David and she enjoyed this because it saved her having to cook with her meagre conveniences. If she let the staff know beforehand they would be able to prepare some food for David also.

Six months after Esther had arrived in Gaza, she received a visit from a military policeman on a motorbike who handed her a letter informing her that as the situation in the area was unstable, she was to be prepared to move at twelve hours notice ready to embark on a ship for Australia. I was given a copy of the same letter by this dispatch rider who informed me that Esther had already been given her Movement Order. At that time it was assumed that if Rommel entered Cairo within the next few days, he would be in Palestine in less than a week. Plans were made to evacuate all Australian civilian personnel within the next few days. After receiving the letter, Esther got in touch with her parents in Jerusalem and they caught a bus down to see her. We never expected them to venture so far by bus but they made it alright. Perhaps they didn't realize how far Gaza was and what the position was, but they did know that they were losing a daughter and that they might never see her again. One farewell which never took place and it was one that we both regretted. On her last day in Gaza Esther waited for Midnight to come but he didn't appear and she was so upset as she wanted so much to say goodbye and to thank him for all he had done. Perhaps he couldn't face the parting. She often said in later years that if she could have brought Midnight with her she would have done so. I would have been really happy to have had him in our family. I was given two days leave to be with Esther till she left but the time expired and nothing had happened so I returned to camp. At 2 am the next morning military police arrived to collect Esther and David together with their luggage and took them to a British Camp at El-Shaft near the Suez Canal and there they waited. They were joined by twelve other Australian soldier's wives, some with babies and an assortment of luggage. After a few days they boarded a troopship which joined a convoy which sailed for Australia. In her first letter Esther praised the military police and their Captain who did so much for them while they camped in the desert. This camp was never designed to accommodate women and children but the military police did everything possible to make them comfortable and even bent a few army rules. Any complaints about this unusual contingent of women and children fell on deaf ears. They were even given permission to board the troopship and inspect the quarters set aside for them to see if they were satisfactory.

I wrote to my friend Ken's parents and family to inform them of Esther's approximate arrival in Melbourne as soon as she sailed. This family had offered to take her to Wangaratta and look after her if she arrived back in Australia before me. We had planned that on her arrival she would get in touch with the Travellers Aid Society and stay there till Ken's family came to get her. She had only been there one day when two of Ken's sisters arrived to help her so she went with them and stayed for quite some time. The family thoroughly spoiled her and David.

Esther had been in Australia about seven months when she wrote telling me that we had another son, whom we called Eddie after my youngest brother. She had kept the news to herself for a long time so that I wouldn't be worried. More than a year after Esther left Gaza my unit sailed for home as the troops were badly needed closer to home in the Pacific.

Chapter 21

Back to the Bush

I arrived home with visions of what I was going to do with the forty five day's leave I had accumulated, planning that I would spend most of that time with Esther and the children and take them for a few days visit with Uncle Jim and Aunt Laura. When Ken and I were given our freedom we headed straight up to Wangaratta and there the family gave us a mighty welcome. Unfortunately my freedom was short lived as three days later I received a telegram telling me to rejoin my unit immediately at the Transit Camp in Melbourne. There we were held up for three days until all the boys were back in camp and then sent up to Queensland. We spent many months in this camp before going on to New Guinea. Seven months after arriving in New Guinea I caught malaria very badly and was returned to Queensland. Just as I was due to leave hospital I came down with pneumonia so spent another three weeks in bed. By this time I had lost a lot of weight and wasn't in very good condition so the doctors recommended that I be returned to Melbourne until I had fully recovered. On arrival I was given two week's sick leave.

By this time Esther had moved into a little house in Broadford which was sixty kilometres from Melbourne so I joined her and the two little ones there. I had been home only eight days when I again came down with malaria which put me in the Military Hospital for three weeks. I went home to spend another three week's sick leave with Esther. On my return to camp I was told to report to the Medical Board where I was passed as medically unfit and was offered a desk job at Army Headquarters in Melbourne. I took this job and continued in it until my discharge about a year later. Esther wanted me to be close to the hospital as the army doctor had been explaining to her that the type of malaria I had would keep coming back for about twenty years. After the first year the attacks would gradually become further apart but it was essential that I get to the hospital quickly. The symptoms were also explained to her so that she would have some warning of an impending attack. I had four bouts of malaria in the following year and by this time I was having difficulty eating. My capacity for food had been halved and the children could eat more than me. Each year the attacks got further apart for the next fifteen and since then I have only been left with the after effects.

In September 1944, a new face appeared on the "totem pole". A third son arrived and we called him Ken after my army mate who had died of war wounds received in New Guinea. I had seen Ken the day before he went on his last patrol and two days later he had been evacuated to hospital on the mainland. We met again a year later in the same hospital. He was in very bad shape and said that they had dug four bullets out of his hide. He may have been short on discipline but he had lots of courage. I was to see him one last time before he died. He told me that he had married an Aboriginal girl in Queensland and was going to go walkabout because he couldn't settle down. Unfortunately he wasn't to enjoy married life for long before his last walkabout. He was the only real mate I ever had. To this day I still correspond with one of his sisters, Ivy, in Broadford. She was a great help to Esther while I was away.

Everybody was excited about the arrival of baby Ken but our joy was dampened by the arrival of the news that Esther's brother, Asher had been arrested in Jerusalem by the British because he was an active member of Irgun Brigade (an underground military organisation). He was sent to Latrun Prison, Palestine for three months before being transferred together with 200 other prisoners to Africa. First he was in Eretrea, then shifted to the Sudan, back to Eretrea then finally to Kenya. He spent another four months there, till 1948 and during that time we were able to send him parcels of food and

clothing and occasional letters. His parents suffered a great deal while he was interred, so we were overjoyed when he was finally returned to Jerusalem. Asher later became a lawyer and lives in Jerusalem with his family. On a recent visit to his home, he pulled out from a cupboard two woollen pullovers that Esther had knitted for him over forty years ago and sent to him in Kenya. He recalled how bitterly cold the nights were in the camps, although the days were very hot so those garments helped him to survive and he keeps them as a memento of the past.

In 1945, a month before my six years of Army Service was up, I was given the option of staying on in the job or of being discharged. I took the latter as I wanted to get away from Melbourne. Esther was very upset by this decision as she would have liked me to stay in this secure job and stay close to the hospital but I explained to her why I didn't wish to remain. I felt so depressed in Melbourne and I wanted to get back to my block of land in the country. This city had too many sad reminders of the past. Nothing would hold me, I needed the open spaces. After a lot of discussion, Esther finally agreed to my request. She was concerned about whether I was fit enough to work hard but was prepared to give it a try. I wasted no time in ordering a carrier to take us to Timboon, we didn't have many belongings so only needed a small van.

Timboon was only one hundred and forty miles away and I thought that it would only take us a couple of hours to drive there but I was wrong. I hadn't taken into consideration the changes that the war had brought. When the removalist van arrived after lunch I noticed that like most trucks, it was fitted with a gas-producer which burnt charcoal. Petrol was scarce and heavily rationed. The driver informed us that he only averaged about twenty miles an hour and would have to stop occasionally to stoke the fire so our trip could take five hours. I didn't know what to expect when I got to my property as I hadn't seen it for six years and I was a bit worried about arriving in the dark. It was a painfully slow trip but we finally arrived after dark, thankful that the children were asleep. I pushed my way through the scrub to locate the hut, about thirty metres from the road and worked my way back, trampling a track as I went.

When Esther and the driver first saw the hut, they seemed to be at a loss for words. I hadn't gone into detail with Esther about the possible condition of the hut but the driver exclaimed, "You can't possibly live there!" But he didn't know how determined I was to do just that. It was just as well that Esther had the foresight to bring candles and matches in her bag, which she lit and placed wherever possible while I hunted for any unwanted, crawling things that might have taken up residence. The driver and I carried our belongings up from the van, leaving the sleeping children till last. Quickly I lit a fire and put the kettle on to boil and invited the driver to share a mug of tea with us before I paid him and gave him instructions for returning to the main road. Esther started making something to eat now that the fire was going well while I was busy getting the beds set up. We were all so tired after our long trip we would be hitting the hay as soon as we had our snack. I noticed Esther having a good look around the place. There wasn't much to see in this bachelor flat, there was one large room with a huge fireplace, a tin roof and walls, two tiny windows and a large door, while the floor was the good old earth. Not long after we climbed into bed there was a clap of thunder then the heavens opened up and rain poured down all night.

Next morning I woke while it was still dark so I decided to stay in bed till daylight came and it was time to light the fire. Just on dawn, Esther woke, looked out of the bed and said, "Jim, things are moving around on the floor, how could that be?" I didn't know but when I put out my hand to feel the floor, I discovered that it was covered with about three inches of water. I got up and put on my water-logged boots to investigate and found that the water was

running in under one wall and out under the opposite side wall and the flow of water was moving anything that could float. Outside the rain had gone and the sun was coming out so I brought all our wet things and hung them on tree branches to dry. I then lit a fire to dry inside the house and make tea while Esther spread some blankets on the ground to sit the children on to dress them. She must have thought that this was the limit and I knew that it wasn't the homecoming that she was entitled to but it was the best that I could do. I suppose that I should have come to the hut beforehand and got things in order before bringing the rest of the family but I never gave it a thought. We hadn't unpacked much yet so we made toast and boiled eggs for breakfast.

Our neighbour saw the smoke coming from the chimney while he was getting his cows so he was soon on the telephone to let others know that Jim was back. All that day, visitors kept coming and going. Some brought food, others came to see what was urgently needed while others wanted to have a look at this Polish, Jewish girl that I had brought home with me. All the folk were well meaning and very kind to us even if they stared a lot at Esther. They were just getting used to having a foreigner in their midst.

We had many invitations to meals and Esther was thankful that it would save her cooking so much over the open fire till the stove arrived. On that first night we went to visit Uncle Jim and Auntie Laura and stayed late as we had a lot to talk about. Uncle asked Esther to make a list of things that she would need and she replied that it would be easier to make a list of the things that she had such as a roof, walls and floor. Everything else was needed. On the first Saturday a few people arrived, some with timber, others with tools and we made a wooden floor and built an outhouse in a hurry. I knew that it would have to be replaced soon before a strong wind blew it over. It would be quite embarrassing if someone was sitting there when that happened. There was so much to do to make the place livable that it was clear that it would take some time. The most urgent job was to build another two rooms.

We realised that we would have to go to Melbourne as soon as possible to buy some things for the house and for whatever was needed for Esther and the children. Although there were towns close by I had two vouchers from the army, one for \$6 to buy civvies and a smaller amount to buy tools of trade and these could only be cashed in the city.

So one week later we left the children with a neighbour and started out early for Melbourne. I had accrued \$300 from deferred pay over six years and payment in lieu of leave that I had not taken and that was quite a princely sum in those days. Firstly we went to London Stores to change the clothing vouchers and I became the owner of an overcoat, a suit, a hat, two shirts, two sets of underwear, three pairs of socks and a pair of shoes. These were parcelled up for me to carry.

Esther then went off on her own to get what she needed while I went to a hardware store and with the second voucher bought two axes, a crosscut saw, hammer and wedges. All of which had the feel of old friends. I couldn't carry them all so I called a taxi to take these goods to the Spencer Street Station luggage room. I met Esther in Myers Store where she had three large parcels waiting for me and after I had returned from the second taxi trip to the station she had finished her shopping. Luckily Uncle Jim had arranged to meet us with the truck so he helped us to get our goods home in one trip. It was obvious that we needed to buy much more but next time we could shop at a nearby local store. I started building two extra rooms for bedrooms, we would still need the hut for cooking and eating in. I was only able to do a little work at a time on the construction as I was working in the lime quarries nearby and after a hard day's work, coming home and attending to all the chores waiting for me, I was quite tired.

My job in the quarry was breaking stones down into the size that a man could lift when loading them into trucks which took them to the crusher. There they were pounded into powder that was burnt in the kilns. This work reminded me of the films I had seen of convicts doing time on the rockpile. After a few months the work started to slacken off and I knew that I would be the first one put off as I had been working there the shortest time. I started looking for another job and fortunately I heard that the Shire Council was looking for men to work on the roads. My only problem was, I had to have a pair of working horses to pull the horse-drawn graders. The council only supplied the grader.

While I was looking around for suitable horses I was given the job of clearing the scrub along the edges of the road and cleaning out the stormwater ditches. I bought one horse from Uncle Jim. She was a good working mare that I had worked before the war. The problem was finding another one. During that time I was able to push the building along and get the two bedrooms finished. On Saturday and Sunday's I could usually get a helper if I had heavy work to do. Many people had offered to help but I tried to manage on my own as much as possible. This new job with the council was much easier for me than stone breaking. I am afraid that the "Gentleman" up above didn't give me the build or strength for such heavy work.

Our children were growing up fast. David was five, Eddie three and Ken still a baby. For some time we had a strong suspicion that Eddie was the instigator of most of the troubles that he and his brother were getting into, though it was always David who got the blame. Eddie would make the suggestions and do the urging and David got caught in the act of doing the deed. I was in the habit of hanging my shotgun on two pegs in the kitchen wall and putting the cartridges on top of the dresser. When I went hunting I would take down the boxes and fill the cartridge belt which I strapped around my waist. One box had orange coloured cartridges with rabbit shot, the others were blue with heavier shot for foxes and kangaroos. The two boys liked to stand these cartridges up in rows, they called them dad's soldiers.

One night when we were asleep I was roused by a noise coming from the adjoining bedroom which was not unusual as they often used to play quietly by the dim light of the lamp we kept burning, before going to sleep. We left the lamp burning in case we had to get up to see to the baby. As the noise increased I decided to get out of bed and investigate. As I entered the room I saw David and Eddie sitting on one of the beds surrounded by empty cartridge cases. On one blanket was a mound of round lead shot and on another a mound of black cordite powder. Scattered about on the beds were cartridge wads that separated the contents when they were in the packed cartridge case. They had accomplished this work with the aid of a fork and a pair of scissors. I asked them as calmly as I could what they thought they were going. David answered, "Eddie asked me to bring Dad's soldiers, which I did. Then he wanted to know what was inside and sent me to the kitchen to bring something to take the top off, which I did. Then he asked me to open them, which I did". The result was sixteen ruined cartridges. I cleaned up all the mess and got rid of the evidence. This incident made us realise that Eddie was the boss and David his faithful slave so we were blaming the wrong boy for many of the misdeeds. It took me a few days before I could tell Esther of what had happened that night and the boy's lucky escape. We were fortunate that they didn't try to remove the detonators! From that time onwards I kept the cartridges locked away.

By now I had cleared a couple of acres and it really looked as if somebody did live here. I was still looking for a second horse when I heard that a farmer living about five miles away had some horses for sale so one Saturday I harnessed Rose, the mare, to the cart and I set off with Esther and

the kids, taking a picnic lunch with us. I knew that it would be a slow trip as Rose's top speed was a plodding walk but I needed her. I decided that if I had to bring another horse home, I could tie it to the rear of the cart and whatever happened, the kids would enjoy the outing.

When we arrived at the farmer's place he took us to the paddock where he had three horses for sale. He sent his sons to bring them down to the gate so that we could have a good look at them. He wanted \$30 each for two of the horses but for the youngest, a colt he wanted only \$12. While he waited, a dog trotted across and curled up at the farmer's feet. Finally, after a lot of trouble they got the horses down close enough for us to inspect them. The colt seemed to be causing all the trouble but he looked to be a fine horse. I thought that there must be something wrong with him as the price was so low yet he appeared to be the best of the three. When I asked about him I was told that they had trouble catching him and he hadn't yet been broken into harness yet. They didn't want a troublemaker on the farm. The other two had already worked as a team. Suddenly Esther said, I like this young horse, he has a lot of spirit and energy and never stops moving about. I think you should buy him, Jim and I'm sure you won't regret it. I think he will work very well with the mare." This surprised me as it was the first time that Esther had ever showed any interest in an animal so I trusted her instinct and asked the farmer what else he could tell me about the colt. He was telling me that he broke out of fences when at that moment, the dog rose up and the colt gave a snort and galloped away. I realised then what was wrong with the horse, he hated dogs! I enquired whether the farmer usually sent the dog to bring in the horse and he admitted that he sometimes did. So I said, "Fine, I will take him. Catch him and I'll tie him to the cart, pay for him and we'll be off." Esther said, "This will be a challenge - to see if you can make a good horse of him. If not, we can always sell him and buy another." I thought that this was just like a woman, not thinking of the time that would be lost if he didn't work out.

The following Monday I went into town to buy an electric fence unit and asked Esther in the meantime to find a name for the colt. I picked up the unit then went to the garage for a car battery. After arriving home, I put the unit on the outside wall of the hut, the battery on the floor, connected them, then ran a wire from the unit across the yard and around the inside of the fence before turning it on. I went outside, picked up an armful of hay and stood by the fence. The colt, that Esther had decided to call Sailor came over, touched the wire and pulled back, shaking. After a few moments he came again and got another shock. By now he had learnt his lesson so when I tried to coax him a third time he wouldn't come within a metre of the fence. I left the electric fence on for a week until the ticking began to get on our nerves, especially at mealtimes so I turned it off. I noticed that Sailor still didn't go near the fence so we decided to leave the electricity off for a while. A week later we were over at Uncle Jim's for afternoon tea when a neighbour came in to tell us that our horse had broken out and was heading down the road. He had come to visit us at home and the horse seemed to go crazy, smashed through the fence and galloped off. I asked whether he had a dog with him and when he said yes, I asked him never to bring his dog when he came to visit us again because Sailor had a fear of dogs. He went off to saddle a horse and an hour later he brought Sailor back to the yard. I had repaired the fence by then so I turned on the electric charge on the fence. It was only a twelve volt unit, a human wouldn't feel it but animals are more sensitive and apparently feel it quite strongly. I thought that I would leave the two horses together for another week before I tried Sailor out in the cart. At the worse, the colt could only kick the cart to pieces. Esther said that she would feed and water them while I was away working during the week.

Before I could try Sailor in the cart harnessed to the mare the next Saturday, Esther said, "I want to show you something first. I haven't been idle

while you have been away." She came out with the bridle, hung it on the gate post, went back inside, brought out a box and turned it upside down on the ground. Next she removed the bridle from the post, stood on the box and called Sailor. He came over to her so she stroked his neck and nose and gave him an apple she had in her pocket. Sailor stood like a statue till she put the bridle on as she had watched me do with the mare although she had to stand on her toes to reach it over his ears. I couldn't believe my eyes. She said, "An apple a day has more uses than to keep the doctor away." It had taken her a few days to get him to lower his head enough to put the bridle over his ears and she was sure that if she could get him to lower his head right down she wouldn't need the box. Esther was only five foot tall so she looked so small next to this heavy draughthorse. She told me that the previous day our neighbour, Don Love had come over to bring something for us bringing his dog with him. Sailor has snorted and pranced around the yard trying to get out but as soon as they had gone he settled down again. She agreed with me that the only problem was his fear of dogs, which I had suspected from the first day we saw him. Within the week I had the pair of them working the grader levelling the roads like old buddies. I worked them each day and Esther insisted in looking after them when they were home. From that time on, the only time we needed to switch on the electric fence was when there was a dog about.

All country roads were made of gravel and after a lot of use became rutted and potholed and very dangerous to drive on. Once a month it was necessary to have them graded level again. The grader was a very heavy steel structure on four iron wheels and had a large blade that extended beyond both sides of the frame and could be lifted and lowered by two hand wheels so that the blade would cut through the gravel to the bottom of the deepest hole. To do a good job it was necessary to do five trips on each section of the road. Each morning I would go along one edge of the road for three miles, turn and come back on the other side. The next trip would be aimed at the wheel tracks on each side. The final trip would be along the centre of the road to finish that three mile section. Next morning I would start on another three miles and in this way I would cover about sixty miles each month. I would start from the beginning again the following month. Each night I would set up a rough corral which I would use in the preceeding months. On Fridays I would finish early to get home before dark as the grader was not equipped with lights. The horses would get two days rest at the end of the week. They needed it as it was very heavy work pulling the grader all day. David and Eddie liked to watch their mother attend to the horses. They would always line up outside the fence and peep through. My only worry was that Sailor would put one of his heavy hooves on Esther's feet. He had such large hooves, I had to get the blacksmith to forge a special size for him and he was very heavy in his walk so he wore out twice as many shoes as the mare. If I had had two horses like him I would have ended up in the poorhouse because of the cost. The road grader job lasted about two years before the Shire decided to replace the horse graders with mechanised ones. One of these monsters could cover four times the stretch of road that a horse drawn grader could manage so were a big saving in labour costs.

In December 1946 Esther suggested that we take a few days off during the Christmas holidays and go to the holiday resort of Peterborough. The kids would surely love to be down on the beach and I could do some longed-for fishing. We planned to return home for New Year's Day so we got together all the gear required for five days, turned the horses out to fend for themselves in the next door neighbours paddock and set off. We only had to travel 23 miles so on arrival we pitched the tent and while waiting for supper, got all the fishing gear out and prepared the equipment for the next morning. I had taken some extra rods for Esther and the older children in case they wanted to try their luck. That evening the wind came up and it started to rain and it continued to rain on and off for three days. We spent more time in the tent than out of it so

it was quite a miserable holiday for all of us. On the afternoon of the third day I packed everything up and we all returned home. That apparently was a sign for the weather to clear. A friend came to see us the next afternoon to tell us that he had just come back from a good day's fishing in Peterborough and asked if we would like to join him the next day. Esther declined but persuaded me to go along with him so the next day the two of us went to Peterborough, hired a boat and caught 86 fish. The next day we brought in 93 but the following day we didn't even get a bite. Nevertheless, we had enough fish to feed the neighbours for a few days and we had really enjoyed ourselves while the fish were biting. You have to take it as it comes - "Luck is the name of the game".

Smoke's Going Up Over The Bush

Since early settlement, Australia's large areas of dense forest have been prone to bushfires. Many were large and disastrous to life, stock and property. The people who lived in these areas, showed great courage in the fight to save their lives, together with their neighbours property, disregarding the risks. After the fires had passed, they started to rebuild over the ashes - that was all they had left - with great spirit and tenacity. I take my hat off to all those firemen and volunteers who make Australia a safer place to live in!

Fires can start from various causes, like a spark from a railway engine, a sunbeam focussed on a bottle or a bit of broken glass, but more commonly by a camper who failed to make sure that his campfire was extinguished before leaving, or even a careless motorist throwing out a burning match or cigarette from a passing car.

It takes very little to ignite grass or undergrowth on a very hot day, when everything is tinder-dry. Once started and fanned by a strong wind, the fire can spread rapidly. Unfortunately few people take notice of the many "Prevent Bush Fires" signs erected throughout the country, and cause great human suffering which could have been easily prevented.

My first experience with a bushfire was at Warrandyte (then a small town not far from Melbourne). It must have been during the summer of 1938 or 1939 when I arrived there. My intention was just to pass through, but on seeing this nice little place on the banks of the Yarra River, I decided to stay a while and camped under a tree, beside the water. It was very pleasant staying in this beautiful spot. After a week there were no more jobs available, so I moved on. Several months later I again passed through the area and was appalled by the sight that met my eyes. A bushfire had spread through Warrandyte the week before and half the place was burned to the ground. I saw a few things still standing, there were chimneys, masses of twisted irons which were once roofing irons and beds, and twisted blackened water tanks. Among these ruins moved the pathetic figures of the owners, sifting through the ashes, hoping to find something of value, anything to salvage from what used to be their homes. Realising that there was nothing in my power to help them, I took myself off, but the sad picture I had seen stayed with me for a long time.

My next encounter with a bushfire in which I was personally involved, was in the summer of 1950. I was working at that time in the hardware store of Timboon. One morning, on arrival at work, I heard that a fire had started up along the coast. This was not unusual, as small fires used to break out throughout the summer months and were usually contained by the local residents. In case the fire spread out of control, we would have known about it soon enough. So, for the rest of the day we thought no more about it, but next morning a hot wind had sprung up and we were told that the fire had started to spread.

We saw the trucks of the Country Fire Authority passing through on their way south. As trucks and volunteers from all around the district were arriving, we learned that the fire was only 20 miles away and heading in our direction. There was a call for volunteers and I asked Mr Church, my boss, for time off. He said: "Go ahead, we'll manage O.K." so off I trotted, till I met some others with a car going in my direction. They picked me up and we carried on till we came close to one of the fire trucks. We were given knapsacks full of water to carry on our backs and fire beaters. We were also instructed to patrol

the road and put out any fires that came our way, thus preventing them to cross to the other side of the road.

Soon we were running around and beating out the fires that came creeping up from all sides. The heat and the smoke was almost unbearable. It was a back-breaking task, and as soon as the knapsack was empty we had to run back to the truck to refill it.

At around noon a farmer arrived by truck with much needed refreshments of tea and sandwiches. There was bare time to gulp something down and we were called back, as some places further along the road had flared up again, after we had beaten them out.

In the late afternoon volunteers arrived to relieve us. The wind had abated, and this gave us a much needed respite. The relief team stayed on while we were driven home, all black with soot and dog-tired, to a much needed shower and rest.

Esther had been very worried when I did not get home at the usual time. She had no way of communicating with me, and she had seen the smoke in the distance, as our house was on the opposite side of Timboon, to the fire. Was she glad to see me coming, blackened as I was!

Next morning as we were having breakfast, the wind started to rise and there were all indications that a hot day was coming up so we knew that we were in for another hectic day.

I took my bike - the truck might have been an encumbrance on the roads - and started out. As I rode on, I met the men with whom I had fought the fires the day before. I learned from them, that new fires had sprung up, crossed the road, and in many places covered a three mile front of devastation.

I joined the group and we approached the fire-chief for instructions. All the volunteers were assembled by then and were split into teams. Each received a fire-fighting team. I, together with four others, was sent to a farm that belonged to a friend of the family.

This place was right in the path of the fire, which was getting dangerously close to his property. We set to work immediately on arrival, clearing away all possible inflammable material from around the house. While Ian, the owner went out to bring his stock closer to the house, we tried to persuade Mary, his wife, to go into town until everything was over. However, she refused to leave and made ready to do whatever she could to help - last but not least to keep the tea-kettle boiling for us tea-thirsty men.

We went around the house closing all the windows and doors to prevent sparks blowing in and to avoid draughts that could have produced a sucking action for the fire. After all this was attended to, we started wetting the exposed side of the house and preparing wet bags.

By now the fire was coming speedily towards us. Just as the heat and smoke became intolerable, the wind shifted slightly and the fire-path passed over just a short distance from the house and veered off. Later, as we were stamping out the small fires that were still creeping on the ground, we realised how ineffectual our efforts would have been, had the fire kept coming straight over us. The house was standing, though most of the crops and fences were gone. After a couple of hours we were satisfied that Ian and Mary could keep the small fires under control themselves, and we moved on to help others along the road.

That night when I returned battle-weary, the place seemed unusually quiet. I saw Esther in the kitchen preparing supper but didn't see any of the children about. I thought that Esther had sent them over to the neighbours.

After having my shower I came into the kitchen to eat supper and asked my wife where she had sent the kids. She only smiled and said, "I didn't send them anyplace, you wouldn't guess where they are. As the smoke was coming over, they became scared, took their toys and crawled under their beds. Perhaps you can coax them out!"

I knew that their beds wouldn't have given them any protection from the fire, but if it made them feel secure being under the bed, I saw no reason to interfere.

The next day was much the same as the two previous days. I joined the fire-fighting teams again, rushing to where help was needed - in several places.

The fire-chief manipulated his men like a general under battle conditions. He had everything under control, knew where everyone was, could send out teams where needed, pull them out when they were in danger of being trapped in the fire - all at a moment's notice. I put in my day of fire-fighting and when I was relieved, went into town to see my boss to explain why I had been absent from work for three days.

On arrival at the shop I found Mrs Church managing the place with the help of a young girl. She said "Mr Church has joined up too. We'll expect you back when this nightmare is over. We are managing alright."

That night Esther said that she too would like to do something to help. I, however, thought it would be unwise for her to leave the children. The fire was by now only about 5 miles away and should the need arise, Don, our neighbour, could evacuate my family together with his in his truck. So Esther agreed to stay put.

The next day the wind changed direction and at first the fire seemed to head straight towards the town, but later in the morning the fire veered off, circled the town and went back into the heavily timbered region again, about 2 miles from our place.

A group of fire-fighters was dispatched over there, I among them. We hurried to the 'battle field'. As we passed the Parfett farm, we saw a long table set up beside the road. Uncle Jim was unloading loaves of bread from his truck and Aunt Laura, my little wife Esther, and three other ladies from the neighbourhood, were making sandwiches. My four sweet little urchins were running around under the busy women's feet. At both ends of the table were large cans with tea and everyone passing could drink his fill, and was given a packet of sandwiches and a kind and encouraging word.

As I was talking to Uncle Jim, I saw the children stuffing themselves with the choicest sandwiches they could find. So, Esther had found a way to help and still have the children with her after all.

By late afternoon the wind had died down and we understood that there was not much point in hanging around as there wouldn't be any further developments that night. We reasoned that should the fire keep on its course, it would break out onto the road about 2 miles away from its present path, and there would be no way to approach it in the meantime.

The order was given to call it a day, go home and be on the alert for the signal to go into action again. Our signal would be a car passing by and blowing its horn.

So we gathered our "bloated" kids and headed for home. After we had washed the kids and put them to bed, I went out to look at the orange glow in the sky. The smoke was hanging near to the ground, which would have made it difficult to drive anywhere, but there was no movement on the road.

The next morning we were all up early, had a quick breakfast and went straight to Uncle Jim's house, which had become our rallying point. Boxes filled with loaves of fresh bread were unloaded onto the table where they were "attacked" by the sandwich crew. There were ample supplies of meat, cheese, tomatoes, peanut-butter and other goodies. As the morning wore on, both wind and temperature were rising, the weather forecast was for a very hot day!

The fire-chief arrived at our "headquarters" and detailed us off to the places which he had marked on his chart. We were told to contain the fire with all our might and not let it cross the road. There was a stretch of grassy ground from where we could leap over and beat out any small fires creeping on the ground.

By mid-morning we could hear the roar coming through the trees as the fire neared the road, and the heat drove us back to the grass paddock. It was not long before sparks, burning pieces of bark and small limbs came sailing through the air, borne by the hot wind, and wherever they fell to the ground, a fire sprung up.

We were racing from place to place with our knapsacks and beaters; as one fire was extinguished, another started up nearby ... and so it went on and on ...

The fire had almost reached the road now, it was a furnace a mile wide! Men were arriving, there was no time to question them as to how they had got through. One man's trousers caught fire and after dousing him from our knapsacks, we sent him over to the first aid team.

Soon we were battling hundreds of fire spots, jumping from place to place. Somebody brought tea and food for which we were very grateful. Later in the afternoon I was getting careless, out of weariness, and suddenly found myself confronted by a sea of flames! I leaped back just in time, but my eyebrows were gone and my hair was singed. My face and eyes too were affected, from the excessive exposure to the heat and smoke. It looked as if we could not carry on any longer ... Suddenly there was a change in the wind direction, which drove the fire parallel to the road, and the next gust of wind pushed the fire back onto the already burnt-out areas. It was like a miracle!

We then spent some time mopping up, to safe-guard against fires starting up during the night. A handful of new volunteers arrived in the evening to patrol the area and the rest of the battle-weary "soldiers" staggered home somehow.

The next day I returned to work at Mr Church's shop. People looked at me strangely - I must have been a weird sight - without eyebrows and with singed hair, but nobody made fun of me, for which I was grateful.

I had not been at work for five days, but when I received my pay package at the end of the week, I found to my surprise, a full week's wages.

My boss was also the worse for wear, but after a few days we were both back to normal.

Bushfires occur mainly during the hot summer months when the undergrowth is dry and very easily ignited. Once started, should a wind come up, the fire grows rapidly and moves like an express-train. As it surges ahead it generates its own wind and devours everything in its path. In a dense forest, a fire's momentum can grow in a very short time as it sets the trees alight and travels over the treetops - competing with the fire that runs on the ground driven on by the strong wind.

Smouldering pieces of bark and limbs fly ahead of the main fire as a vanguard, starting new fires as they move along. This way a fire can cross roads, rivers and other obstacles in the shortest of times. In fact there is no way to predict how an inflamation will develop as there are so many elements to take into consideration.

The main role is played by the wind, which can change direction as many as 10 times during a day, and thus influence the size and duration of the fire. Sometimes, due to sudden changes of the wind, people become trapped in the fire, with fatal results. A fire can split itself into two parts, then head off in two different directions, like an army which attacks on two fronts.

At times, when evening comes, the temperature drops and the wind abates. These conditions can slow down the fire and give some respite to the fire-fighters. On the other hand, during a hot night, people have to go on battling, because nobody can predict what is going to happen.

The bush at night, after a fire has gone over it during the day, is an eerie sight. There are trees alight from top to bottom, charred limbs falling everywhere, trees exploding and crashing down, sending up thousands of sparks, and tree-stumps and hollow logs burning themselves out.

One cannot describe the intensity of a fire that can turn a green forest, that may have taken hundreds of years to grow, to ashes - all in one day.

Taking Up A Trade

On my property there was a very large, deep waterhole, full of clear running water that was fed by a spring on Uncle Jim's property. The overflow from that spring ran along a creek for part of the way then went underground to surface at this hole then disappeared underground again. This waterhole was used for all our household needs as well as for the horses so I usually filled two buckets of water and carried them up to the house before work each morning. One Saturday morning as I was filling the buckets I saw a movement deep in the hole which made me think that some fish might have found their way up from the river into which the water eventually flowed. I went to the house to collect my fishing gear, baited a hook, dropped the line into the water and tied the other end to a small tree that stood near the water's edge. When I returned to the house, Esther told me that she needed some supplies from town so I harnessed Sailor to the cart and drove off to get them, forgetting to tell her about the line that I had put into the waterhole.

On my return from town the three boys ran to meet me and appeared to be very excited. David was trying to tell me something but was so excited that I couldn't follow what he said. When Esther appeared I asked her what had happened. "Has someone broken a leg or has some scoundrel run away with all our possessions?" I asked. "Nothing like that", answered my good wife, "but when I took the bucket to get water for my washing, I noticed that you had tied a fishing line to a tree but the line was moving around the hole. As I untied the line, it was nearly jerked from my hands. It was very heavy to pull in and when I finally managed to pull it clear of the water, it was what I thought, a snake on the hook. I dumped the line and all in the bucket making sure that it couldn't get up the side and picked up the bucket to take it and show it to Mrs Love, our neighbour. She said that it was an eel over three feet long and suggested that you would like some of it for supper as it was very tasty." Esther replied that on no account was she going to take that thing home nor was she going to cook it. She planned to throw it away in the bushes but Mrs Love persuaded her not to but instead leave it with her as her husband, Don, loved eating eels.

I was pleased for Mrs Love to have it as the thought of eating them disgusted me and I explained to Esther the difference between snakes and eels. The kids were so proud of their mother's fishing prowess and babbled away about it for hours. She was their hero for the day. Even though I was not particularly fond of eels, I liked to go to the waterhole at night to catch them, usually taking one of the boys with me. An eel can put up a good fight if you hook a big one. I had no trouble in getting rid of them as the neighbours loved them. I often took David with me and he would hold the lantern or torch while I removed them off the hook. Many times the only bites were the ones we got from the mosquitoes but that's all a part of the sport of fishing.

During this period I had, on weekends and after work each day, completed our house, dismantled the old hut and tidied the place up. We were quite comfortable even though the "totem pole" was getting higher. Now there were five faces; David, Eddie, Ken, Bruce and Alan. Although they were a handful for Esther she didn't mind and found time for them all. They were good kids, helping each other and their mother. Nevertheless we were longing for a girl. The road job was coming to an end and as we had no further need of the horses, we decided to buy a car to move the family around. I already had a motorbike to drive myself around but some other transport was needed to shift the growing family. Esther spent quite a bit of time visiting Aunty Laura and Uncle Jim and they had become very good friends. She often

went with them when they went shopping and we also got a lift to dances, etc. with them.

Once more I came down with malaria and the local doctor, who knew my medical history notified the Repatriation Hospital who asked me to go for a check up as soon as I could travel. So two weeks later I took the train to Melbourne, expecting to return the same night but I was kept there for nearly two months, till they decided that I was fit for work again. This was the fourth attack of malaria and it was taking so much out of me as each time I could eat less. I was concerned that if this process continued, I would be able to live by only chewing on a bone. When it was time to be discharged, Esther came to the hospital and asked if she could talk to one of the doctors. After his rounds we were both able to see him in his office where Esther asked a few questions. We were told the same as before, that I would probably continue having attacks, each one further apart for about sixteen years and that is exactly what happened. I had to return to the hospital for a check up before going back to work.

Back home we found a message waiting for me, offering me a job at the hardware store in town. I had previously made it known that I was in the market for a job. Next morning I received a notice from the Shire Council saying, "Your services are no longer required." I went to see about the job and was put on immediately. The hardware store sold everything from household goods to building materials.

By now I realised that I was very good with my hands and building things came like second nature to me. At the end of my day's work in the store I began to work part-time with a builder to gain some experience and also to earn extra cash. This builder used to say "There are two types of carpenters in this trade, the first type is one who builds the big houses and the second is the one who builds the wee houses behind the big house. We'll soon see what type you will turn out to be." he said.

All those small mouths at home seemed forever hungry and the food disappeared as fast as I could supply it. They all had good healthy appetites. After a year of working with the builder, I decided to buy a block of land in town to build a house there for our family as it would save me a lot of travelling time. Firstly I would have to get the new house to a stage where we could all move into it, then finish it off while we lived in it. This strange way of building was caused by the fact that I only had enough money to build it to the lock up stage then I would only have the extra cash needed when I could sell my existing home and property.

The time came when I felt confident enough to start out on my own as a builder so I left the store. In town there were two rather small garages, one of which needed to be replaced by a larger building, so I applied for and got the contract to build this new garage. The two partners had plans of what they wanted but when I went to discuss the building, I found that I couldn't follow the plans that had been drawn up. This handicap I hadn't anticipated but after spending two nights with the owners, I could see what they required and visualised how the structure would look on completion. I was able to finish the new garage and the owners were pleased with the result.

The next job I tackled was a brick chemist shop, once more after discussions with the chemist about what was required, and he was very satisfied.

My third project was a house I built in conjunction with another builder but this partnership just didn't work out. According to his plans, the kitchen sink had to be 32 inches from the floor while I reminded him that the lady of

the house was a tall woman and would have to stoop whenever she worked at the sink. He also planned to make all the kitchen cupboards too low for her. This and many other differences between our attitudes made it impossible to work together. If he wanted to know anything he consulted his plans whereas if I was in doubt, I would ask the people who would live in the completed house.

For the next seven years I worked in this way. My satisfactory work on one garage led to building an extension for the other. Both jobs meant construction work in timber, steel and concrete so the experience was invaluable. By now we were living in the house that I had built for us in town but six months after I had completed it, a couple came to ask if I would sell it to them. I agreed to the sale but needed ten weeks grace to give me time to build another house. They agreed so I immediately bought another block of land and started again.

This time Esther said that she wanted the house to be built to her design as she didn't want to shift again and there were now six little mouths to feed. The sixth face to appear was Terry, six boys and still no girl. Esther was coping very well and the older children were quite good at looking after the younger ones. Whenever Esther was asked how she was able to manage such a large family, she always replied that six were no more of a problem than two.

Port Campbell

Late in 1952 Esther showed me an advertisement in the Cobden Times telling us that a restaurant at the nearby seaside resort Port Campbell was offered for lease. She wanted to try it out for a year and if it worked out, maybe stay longer. She felt that it would be easy to organise the cooking business and the idea of earning some money tempted her very much so I promised to help her as much as I could. Before signing the lease we took a trip to Port Campbell to look the place over. The house was an old, rambling building and it looked like extra rooms had been added onto it over the years. It was originally intended to provide overnight accommodation. We decided to take up the lease, so in October moved the family and all our belongings by making two trips with the truck. We just had time to settle in before the Christmas school holidays. We hired two girls who were on school holidays and we intended to break them in so that when they were familiar with the work, we could leave them in charge of the house and the kids. Esther and I wanted to get away for a few days to give us a chance to store up energy for the work ahead. The two girls were very reliable so in time we planned to go and stay with friends in Timboon (about twenty minutes away by road), leaving instructions to ring us only in emergency and drove off.

We had just arrived at our destination when the phone rang. It was one of the girls calling to ask us to come back straight away. "Eddie has cut off his finger in the bread cutter, he has blood all over him and is bawling his eyes out." We rushed home of course, so that was the end of the holiday that didn't ever start. On arrival we found the house in an uproar, the girls hysterical and the kids frightened. After dressing Eddie's wound (it wasn't as terrible as it looked), we tried to calm everyone down and asked to be told how it had happened.

The story went like this. The kids wanted to eat potato chips so they brought out the bread cutter to cut the potato slices. David, aged 11, turned the handle while Eddie, aged 9, pushed the potatoes in. Somehow his finger must have got in the way. Suddenly Eddie started screaming and when David saw what had happened, he fled and hid under the house. I had to crawl underneath to drag the frightened boy out. As I did so, I saw something strange, I spotted ten packets of cigarettes sitting on one of the supporting beams. They were all different brands and had all been opened. I was sure that they must have been taken from the stock we had laid in for sale in the shop, ready for opening day. At that time I didn't say a word about them, but kept my eyes open.

About a week later, Eddie's finger was healing well and didn't bother him much but we wondered where the three boys, David, Eddie and Kenny (aged 7) had gone together. I went looking for them and sure enough, there they sat, under the house puffing away merrily. They suddenly realised that I had seen them and tried to hide the cigarettes but I said, "No, you go on smoking." I sat down with them, lighting myself a cigarette and joined their smoking session. When they had finished, I ordered them to light another cigarette and although they protested that it would make them sick, I handed them each a cigarette and said, "that's the general idea." Kenny was the first to start heaving and retching and the other two were not far behind. That lesson learned, there were never any cigarettes missing from the shop again.

Port Campbell was a really busy place over the summer holidays. It was popular because of its beaches and it was an ideal fishing spot. Hundreds flocked to the beach so our shop, restaurant and kiosk on the beach were kept busy from morning till dusk. On Christmas Day the temperature soared to 108

degrees F, so David and Eddie were set up in the kiosk at 6.30 am that day with two flavours of icecream, vanilla and peppermint to sell at a halfpenny a scoop, wafers, assorted soft drinks and some lollies. We intended to relieve them about 9 am but the customers kept us so busy at the shop only 400 yards away that we weren't able to go down to check up on them. About 7 pm two very tired boys staggered into the shop. They had sold the entire stock at the kiosk and handed me the sum of 67 pounds which was more than a week's takings!

At the end of the holidays the children returned to the consolidated school some miles away and were picked up and returned by bus. Everything was going well. Esther and I were kept very busy from Christmas till Easter, sometimes serving lunch to nearly forty customers. I tried my hand at being the waiter at first, but that was a disaster so was soon relegated to the kitchen to wash dishes.

Our neighbour, a big strong fellow, was the town's blacksmith. During the week you could see him at his anvil, shoeing a horse or repairing farm equipment. He was known as general "Mr Fix-it" in the town as on Sundays he was the preacher in the local church and when someone died, he was also the undertaker. He had a large family and his kids travelled on the school bus with ours. Some of the older boys bullied our children whenever they got the chance and this continued for a while until one day as I was cleaning the shop windows, I saw the school bus pull up in front of our house. David stepped off the bus and seeing me watching must have given him confidence as he hauled off and knocked the biggest boy down. Those bullies had been plagueing them all the way from school and he couldn't take it any longer! The blacksmith, who was working at his anvil, looked up and saw what happened. He had received many complaints about his boys misbehaving so he decided to teach them a lesson. He came over, grabbed the boy's ear and took him to his workshop. There he laid him across the anvil and gave him the worst belting that I have ever seen. I was kind of sorry for that boy but it certainly put an end to his bullying!

With the coming of winter, our careers as caterers came to an end. The season was so short we didn't see any point in keeping the business open for half a year and me looking for work for the other six months, so we decided not to renew the lease but to write the last year off as experience. I went ahead to Timboon, rented a house for a few months and moved the family back. The moment we settled in, I started planning our next house, number three!

The Building Trade

There were seven builders in the district so competition for the jobs was quite keen. The big money was made in building the new houses that were springing up all over the place. From a recommendation, I was invited to come out to the bush to a farmhouse with my family one Sunday as I was probably the only builder who could help with this project. On the following Sunday we all drove off to this farmhouse on top of a hill. This place had a large dairy and the house looked to be at least sixty years old. As we approached the gate and I saw how broken down it was, I was tempted to turn around but Esther said, "Let's go in, after all we have been invited and we are already here." We were met by four elderly people, three brothers and a sister, the youngest was sixty years old. They invited us in and fed all the young ones up on homemade cookies and drinks. Then they told me what they wanted done.

The house had been started by their parents who had been amongst the first settlers in this area, and been added onto piece by piece over the years. The inhabitants were no longer young and were now troubled and inconvenienced by the lack of running water and toilets. A tin bath was in the bathroom and the hot water was carted in buckets from a copper outside. The toilet was a little building fifty metres from the house and their water supply came from a well in the yard which only had a hand pump. Lighting was supplied by candles and kerosene lamps. For the last five years they had been trying to get someone to modernise the whole place and that meant pulling down three of the rooms, putting a new roof over the whole building, building toilets inside connected to a septic tank, building a bathroom with hot and cold running water and creating a kitchen with all the mod cons. If this was done they could live more comfortably in their old age.

I was ready to say "no" to them but I did feel very sorry for these folk as they were living under such harsh conditions. I was told to take my time before giving an answer as they had already waited five years. A friend, who was a designer, would do the paper work for me and they would pay me in advance if required. I told them that I wanted to talk it over with them but the children were getting noisy so one brother took the kids out to where they would see a lot of emus and kangaroos and left us in peace. Esther wanted me to help these people if I could, even if it meant that I would be away a lot and she assured me that they would manage alright. I told them that I would do the job and it would probably take three months to complete. I would have to employ another person and they would have to find enough canvas to cover the house while I had the roof off. The two of us would camp there during the week and go home on weekends and I would need letters for the stores so that we could obtain the materials required. They would have to employ an electrician to install the lighting plant and the electric pump on the well. I told them that I wouldn't need a designer, they would do the designing by telling me exactly what was wanted. I also didn't need a contract and they could pay me for each stage of the job as it was completed. I would come on the following Sunday to discuss the details and measure up the job. My suggestions made them respond like happy children so after having lunch we set off home. The kids, Esther and I had had an enjoyable day out together.

While this job was in progress, one of their neighbours used to pop in occasionally to have a chat and before I was finished he asked me to come to his place, about seven miles away as he had a four-roomed house that he wanted modernised and two more rooms added. As soon as I had finished the four elderly people's house they immediately asked how much was still owing and when I told them that I hadn't made up a detailed account yet, they were

only interested in paying me the full amount. I went on to successfully do the neighbour's job as soon as I completed the first house.

Esther and I often discussed these two families as they were such simple, trusting folk living in an isolated area. They believed everything people told them and everything was taken in good faith. They had no knowledge of the building industry and the cost of building materials so an unscrupulous person could have cheated them easily. People like these are often found in isolated areas and are always very hospitable and homely folk.

When I arrived back home after finishing the two houses, Esther said I was to ring a chap who wanted to talk to me about another job. He had heard of me from one of the families I had just worked for, and as he lived about fifty miles from these people, he could only have got news by smoke signals. He was a bachelor and lived to the north of us and was quite a different sort of person than the ones I had just worked for. He owned a sheep farm, and having outgrown his present shearing-shed he wanted to build a bigger one, leaving the old one for storage. He said he would be my labourer and help with the job and I was grateful for that as he was a very strong well set fellow. Furthermore the building material for this job would be large and heavy and would take three of us to lift some of it.

When I was ready to start, I gathered up all my equipment, loaded it on the truck and set off, arriving at the place at mid morning. I found him already busy digging holes for the foundation posts, so I set my chap to work digging the holes while I went over all the details with him. Before lunch he left to go and put on his dinner. We brought ours with us and ate outside. When his food was cooked he asked me into the house to go over some rough drawings he had prepared, but I could not make sense of them and asked him to explain what he had in mind. This he did and then I could see daylight. We went into the kitchen which was exactly the sort of kitchen you would expect to find in a house belonging to a bachelor who had no time to spend in it and only came in the house to eat and sleep.

The kitchen, which contained an old wood stove on which he cooked his food, had been painted out in white maybe 20 years earlier and was now a dirty yellow. All the walls and ceiling were covered in red splotches and I could not understand what they were. They looked like blood stains and I thought he must have got stuck in to the cat with a butcher's chopper. Finally I said, "Ham" (that was what he said his handle was) "what happened to your kitchen?" He told me that a couple of years previously he and his men just started shearing, and he did not want to leave the shearers too long on their own so he hurried to the house, stoked up the fire, put on one saucepan with some potatoes, and a piece of beef in another. Having no other saucepan, he put a tin of tomato soup in with the potatoes, covered them with water and went back to the shed. Of course he forgot about his cooking when he got busy with the sheep and later decided to go and see how his dinner was getting on. He was near the door when he heard an explosion, and when he entered the kitchen found that the saucepan had boiled dry, the potatoes were burnt and the tin of tomato soup had exploded: result - the spotted room. I asked whether he had ever thought of painting it over. He replied that there was a purpose in leaving the kitchen the way it was - with every new hand who came there to work, Ham found an excuse to get him into the kitchen and of course, like me, they asked what had happened. Ham told them that once a chap came to work for him and did not do a fair day's work for the wages he was paid, and after an argument in the kitchen this was what he left behind. As a result, he never had any trouble with the shearers or any others that came to work for him.

I was getting quite a variety of work with no two jobs the same and this suited me fine. But I had to work very long hours to keep the billy boiling. By

now Esther was living in her fourth house and getting quiet annoyed with me, as I had been selling our houses as soon as someone made me a good offer for them. She said that one day I would get a shock and discover that she had found one she really liked and then would refuse to move. Sometime later there was a minor recession and the Banks tightened up on loans and mortgages, so the building business ground to a halt and suddenly I was looking for work when a year previously I had more than I could handle. Luckily I found work with the P.M.G. - which is the engineering division of the Post Office. I was put on as a linesman and worked outdoors on overhead lines. I was with them for a couple of years during which time I became a storeman, and also did repair work. As this was not a full time job I continued to do other building projects as well.

Chapter 26

It's A Girl!

Time moved on really fast - the year was 1953 and Esther was due any day to go into hospital to have our seventh child. One night I was rudely awakened and told by Esther that her time had come and she was starting to go into labour. I roused David to look after the other children until I returned from the hospital. At that time I had an old Chevy truck, not the most reliable means of transportation, especially on this occasion, but with a prayer we hoped that we would make it. I started the motor and while the engine was warming up I threw a pillow and a couple of blankets into the cabin to make Esther comfortable and warm.

As all this went on, Esther said, "Please hurry, or we may not get there in time!" The hospital was a drive of about 17 miles, but over very rough roads and we had gone about 11 miles when one of the back tyres blew out. I knew it would take some time to change the old type tyres, and I reckoned that if I travelled slowly enough on the flat, we would eventually get there. The alternative would have been to spend an hour on the road changing the tyre. Esther said we should keep going as she didn't think we had that much time!

So off we went at a snail's pace, but with much shaking and bumping and I was only hoping that the old truck would stay together long enough to get us there. Esther was urging me to go faster but it was impossible.

In this way we covered one agonizing mile after another. I uttered a sigh of relief when we finally reached the hospital. I rushed Esther in and within 10 minutes the nurse came out to the waiting room to tell me that we had a baby daughter and to come back later in the morning. It was now three in the morning so I went out to inspect the damage to the car. The tyre and tube were gone and I had been running on just the wheel. I tried to drive to a friend's place to fill in a few hours and to get some sleep but about half-way there, old faithful gave up the ghost and with a crunching noise, the wheel collapsed. I left the truck by the roadside and started walking away. As I looked back at it, I thought it looked like a scuttled ship.

Next morning I went to a garage and came back with the tow-truck driver to bring the patient in. It took two days to get the old vehicle roadworthy again. On my first trip to the hospital, I phoned a neighbour on arrival, to check on the kids and to see if they could get someone to sleep at the house till I returned.

It was really a wonder that Esther and the unborn baby survived the trip and the fast delivery was probably due to the bumpy journey. When Esther was ready to come home, I had to get one of the neighbours to lend me his car as Esther refused to ride with the baby in the old truck - I wonder why?!.....

This was our first girl and we called her Evelyn.

Now there was much rejoicing at home as our first girl had arrived. Esther and I were very happy and the boys were pleased too with having a baby sister. But if they thought she was going to be someone they could look after and protect they were sadly mistaken: she was very much her own girl and look out for any of them who thought otherwise. She grew up a match for any one of them. Her name had been waiting for her since the arrival of the first born and we agreed she was to be called Eve, being the first girl, but by the time she was born Esther thought it was too short a name so she became Evelyn.

Over the years we had always kept one cow for milk, cream and butter. The first three cows we had were all called Eva, and when Evelyn grew older she always accused me of calling her after the cow, and to this day, nothing I say will change her mind. She grew up to be a real 'tom-boy' and used to try to take on her brothers when they got out of line. Their favourite name for her was "the witch" and this used to bring out her fighting spirit. We rarely saw her without bruises, sores or scratches on her arms, legs or face - a real warrior in her effort to be one of the boys. The boys favourite past-time was pulling her plaits even though they would get a kick in the shins for their trouble.

The boys came to me one day and asked if they could use the workshop to make kites. I said they could as long as they cleared up the mess afterwards, put all the tools back in their right places and locked the shed up. When I gave them the key, they went happily on their way. About an hour later, I heard screams coming from the workshop so I rushed over as fast as I could, just in time to see David run out of the door and speed off in one direction, and then Eddie came out running in the other direction.

When I entered, I found Evelyn with her face on the work-bench, her plaits were stretched out on both sides and nailed firmly to the bench with large nails. Everytime she yelled, she got a mouthful of sawdust. I had to use the claw hammer to release her. She was in tears and furious. When I questioned the boys later, they explained that Evelyn pestered them to make a kite for her and when they refused, she started to break their kites up.

I suppose there was a limit to what they were ready to put up with from their little sister!

Chapter 27

Colac

One day I was told that there was a vacancy for a carpenter in a large town called Colac where the PMG headquarters for the area was situated. If my application was accepted I would have to look around for a place to rent, as it was too far away to travel daily. A month later I heard I had been accepted. This was in 1956 and while I was awaiting the result of the interview, the second girl was born. We called her Judy. She turned out to be just the opposite to her sister. She liked to play by herself in the house and chatter away to herself the whole time. She was rarely outside the house and Evelyn was rarely in it. Judy was a collector of dolls - Evelyn collected boys scalps!

The place we had shifted to was called a city by its inhabitants but it was more like a spread out rural town that was surrounded by a large farming district which supplied the towns people with their business. We rented a house for one year, bought two adjoining blocks of land, planning to build our future house on one, while the other was to be the site for a workshop. I had a plan in mind to use it after work and on weekends doing odd jobs or any sort of work that might come my way to help with the weekly budget. As for the house, Esther said she was going to have a big say in how it would look like in the interior designing. She visualised a house that had eight rooms: four bedrooms, a utility room, a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom and laundry. I was told in no uncertain terms that this was to be her last house and that she would refuse to move again. She said I had become like a nomad, wanting to shift my tent to new pastures every year. This house would have to be the last one and she said that if anyone came to the house and looked like a possible buyer she would tell them that there were skeletons under the house - that would surely keep them away. Esther had her eyes open at every stage of the building to make sure I did not take any short cuts or leave out anything she thought was essential. When the framework was completed, I closed off half of it and finished that half first.

When the first part of the house was livable, we moved in although even with two out-buildings it was a squeeze. However in the next three months I finished the rest of the house and found that in fact we could have done with a fifth bedroom. But we managed to be comfortable and Esther was quite proud of it. She talked about "my house, my design, my colour" and I felt very sorry for anyone who might come and try to buy it if she was home on her own. In any event Esther had her house for the next ten years and our next shift was more her decision than mine. I had just finished building our house when I was informed there was another little one on the way. I had a lot of help from the older boys who were quite useful with their hands and when I was at work I could always leave them a lot of small jobs to do. They knew that if they hadn't done their job properly I would make them do it again. They were also a great help looking after the little ones when we were in town shopping. Eventually the house was finished to Esther's satisfaction and I had to settle down to work in earnest to finish paying for what was still owing for the building materials. The main thing was that Esther eventually got what she called her "dream home". Then the ninth and last of our children was born and we called him Rodney. We always thought ourselves very lucky to be blessed with all these healthy kids, when others with small families had not had the same good fortune. The only thing we wanted to do but never found the opportunity, was to go back to Israel for a visit as Esther was longing to see her family again. But with trying to keep afloat while the children were coming along and forever building bigger houses to accommodate them there just wasn't the time or money. We had started from a small hut and had progressed to an eight roomed house but could still have used one more.

During the next seven years everything went well for us with no more serious problems than we could handle. I was still working with the PMG and had started a hiring-service, supplying equipment for all sorts of jobs at home. We hired out anything from small electric lawn mowers to large petrol scythes; from small saws of all kinds to very large ones for chopping firewood; barrows, concrete mixers, painting equipment, the lot, you name it, we supplied it. We built ourselves most of the items we carried in this service. Gradually within a year it was far too much for Esther to look after during the day even though this was the quietest time. The busy period was in the evening, weekends and holidays, when the older boys and myself looked after it.

Soon I had to leave my other job at the PMG to be home to work in the Hire-Service all the time, and then had to employ another person to keep pace with the maintenance of the equipment. We needed all hands on deck in the evenings, weekends and holidays. The service developed into a twenty-four hour, seven day a week job and for the next year there was no break. I realized that it would need two families - one worrying about the first half of the week and the other to look after things for the remainder of the week, but we kept at it for another year. The boys were a great help, particularly as we were making most of the equipment ourselves. This was because it had to stand up to more use and abuse than bought equipment was made to take. They helped out on weekends and often after school when they were free.

The boys were going to Scouts and Cubs, Evelyn to the Girl Guides and Judy to the Brownies. The older ones would go on their bikes and I would take the younger ones and bring them home in the car. We had two Queen's Scouts in the family: David was the first and sometime later Ken became the second in the family to reach that status. Both were presented with their Queen's awards at Government House in Melbourne, together with others from different parts of Australia, New Guinea and Papua.

They were quite impressive ceremonies with a garden party afterwards. It was a rare thing for two brothers from one family to become honoured in such a way. Both David and Ken became the top Ten Pin Bowlers of the district and went bowling at least two nights a week. Ken also participated in long distance running and did very well at it till unfortunately one of his legs was badly injured in a car accident. This left David in the top position in the bowling team, but the only running I think he ever did was when he slept in and was late for work.

All of the children had different interests: Eddie was secretary of a local football club and that used up most of his spare time; David was learning Motor Mechanics; Bruce - metal work and welding; Alan - fitting and turning. For some reason not one of them wanted to do woodwork even though they had all helped me at times on building jobs. Eddie and Alan also liked to work with their mother, particularly in the kitchen and were a great help in easing the heavy work load she had to cope with: eleven hungry mouths to feed and six cut lunches to prepare at night for the next day. All of them had their likes and dislikes and the kitchen looked like a grocery shop. Before Esther retired for the night she would line up the breakfast foods in order to get off to a flying start next morning. Weetbix for Rodney, Crispies for Judy, Rice Bubbles for Evelyn, Cornflakes for Terry, etc. Everyone to their peculiar taste. Looking back now I don't know how we managed financially or physically: perhaps it was because we were too busy to give it much thought.

Chapter 28

Holiday

It was 1965, and time for us to have a break so we started looking for people who would look after the business while we took a holiday. Unfortunately we couldn't find anyone who was prepared to take on the responsibility and the long hours necessary so we decided to auction all the hire equipment and stick to the building business. The three eldest boys were now working and I could easily find enough work to take the pressure off the family. Everything turned out better than we expected. Two families who lived side by side purchased the business as a going concern.

Now that the business was off our backs I wanted to get started right away on my next venture but Esther wanted to plan a holiday. We agreed that the time was ripe to travel to Israel and visit her family. We would take Rodney, the youngest with us as well as Bruce, the fourth eldest son as he had worked so hard with me after school and on weekends. The two girls would stay with friends and the others would stay at home for the ten weeks holiday.

Apart from arranging passports and tickets, as well as packing suitcases, we had to arrange for vaccinations. Seven year old Rodney took his cuddly panda bear along with him to the doctor's for comfort. The doctor asked if he was taking his bear with him. "Yes", was the reply, so the bear had to have his injection too, and he went first. He hunted around for an old needle which was used to inoculate panda bear. This action made Rodney braver so that he didn't hesitate to roll up his sleeve and hold his arm out. The doctor proved that a little psychology goes a long way with children.

In April 1966 we flew to Hong Kong, spending three days buying presents for friends and family in Israel. In this shopper's paradise there was no problem finding suitable gifts, but our bags were overweight when we departed. At Ben Gurion airport we were met by Asher, Esther's brother, whom we hadn't seen for twenty four years. He was a teenager then but now a lawyer in Jerusalem. The luggage was loaded into the waiting taxi before we headed off for Jerusalem. Every mile along the road brought back vivid memories, although there had been many changes. The countryside was still the same and our feelings were hard to describe as we left the coastal plain and started the long uphill drive to the holiest of cities. It was like making a pilgrimage. In Jerusalem we visited Esther's parents before going on to Asher's flat, which would be our headquarters. From there we toured the country, meeting many relatives including the religious families. We were welcomed warmly and it appeared that our past sins had been forgiven.

Passover (Pesach) fell during our stay so we attended the Passover Feast (Sedar) at the parent's home. Twenty seven people were seated around the tables and four different languages were spoken so Esther translated for us. We accepted many invitations to go and visit more families.

During our travels we noticed many changes in the country but very little had been altered in Jerusalem itself, although some of the British built police stations were still there to remind us of that era.

Although we enjoyed our holiday very much, something seemed to be worrying Esther. She finally told me of her concern for her aging parents who she wouldn't be able to help whilst she lived so far away in Australia. Asher was now married and was not always available. She would like to live closer to them and I could see that she was finding it hard to face leaving them now that she had been reunited. I suggested that they might like to come and live with us in Australia, but no, they wished to be near to Asher and had no

wish to leave Jerusalem. They couldn't understand why we couldn't come to live in Israel with them and I knew that Esther was thinking this way but hadn't spoken of it. Later that night she discussed with Asher her concern for their parents health and I was happy to fall in with their decision. I told her that she couldn't have her cake and eat it too, but before that night was over I found that she could do just that.

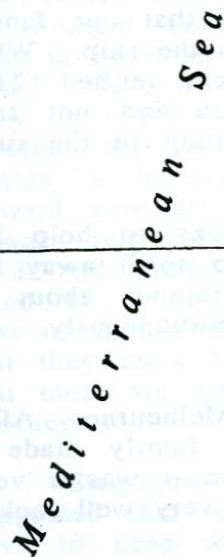
Asher asked me if I would be happy to live in Israel and I replied that I could always make my home wherever my bed was and I had no roots left in Australia that I knew of. I didn't know whether the oldest boys would come with us and start afresh. David was now married and had a child and there was Eddie and Kenny to consider. On our return to Australia we would have a family discussion and find out their decisions. Asher was very happy about the prospect of Esther living nearby. They were still very close and had continually kept in touch over the years. He would be able to help us with any legal work required.

First, we had to decide where we would accommodate our "lost tribe" and we would need a workshop to set up a business. The next three weeks were spent looking for an area where jobs were available and somewhere suitable for a family business. Bruce suggested that we set up a factory for making trailers for cars and trucks like we had been doing back home, possibly building caravans. They were so popular for holidaying in Australia but he hadn't seen a single one in Israel. We could do odd work in metal and woodwork as a sideline till we got on our feet. Arad, a new town being built near the Dead Sea, sounded promising but when we saw that we would be living squeezed up together with forty other families and walking up and down stairs all day, we crossed that one off the list. Next we went to Ashdod, a port south of Tel Aviv. Here we found the ideal, simple houses on a little bit of land but on enquiring we found that they had all been snapped up a year before and the only available housing was in the next block of flats, so once more we drew a blank.

At Asher's suggestion, we tried Ashkelon, a small town between Ashdod and Tel Aviv and were pleased at the response to our enquiries. There we were offered two units for our large family and which would be completed in six months time. They were prepared to give us a loan and support us in our business venture. We filled in the paperwork and informed them that we would return from Australia in nine months time. Several trips were required to tie up all the details but we remained happy with our decision because Ashkelon was close to the commercial areas and close enough to Jerusalem for Esther to visit often. Everything was sewn up in Israel, but we knew that we faced the final arrangements and the older boys decision back in Australia.

Eventually it was time to say goodbye. We spent a week in Hong Kong, stocking up with presents for the return trip. It felt great to be home with our batteries recharged ready to face life once again. And it was going to be busy. David gave us his answer in a few days; he had decided to stay put. Eddie took longer to finally decide to stay in Australia too. Kenny wanted to go with us and because we would need someone in Israel to follow things up, he planned to go as soon as possible. He departed one month later and was accepted in an Ulpan (Hebrew school) at Kibbutz Kfar Hanassi in Upper Galilee.

CEASE FIRE LINES, JUNE 1967



Chapter 29

Start of a New Life

The younger children were quite excited about going on a long trip and starting a new life in another country. Their only regret was that they were leaving behind two brothers and close friends.

My main concern was finding a job to keep us going. When I delivered a letter from Jerusalem to a man in Colac, he enquired about my position and offered me a job which I commenced the next morning. This solved one of our problems as I was able to work there for a year till I left Australia. Our second problem was, when would we sell the house? We decided to take a gamble and wait till three months before our departure.

Next we had to decide what to take with us and what to leave. The furniture contained in our eight large rooms certainly wouldn't fit into four small ones, so two lists were made. Crates needed to be constructed for the goods we would take with us. The shipping agent informed us that the maximum size of the crates was one cubic metre so Bruce and I set to work dismantling and packing the furniture to be reassembled later. Twenty two crates were finally taken to the port but on arrival we found that one family had a piano, two wardrobes and a double bed ready to load onto the ship. When asked why they were permitted this luxury, the shipping agent replied, "The thing to do with those forms is to read between the lines and not take everything for granted." We had tried to do everything according to the rules and that was what we got for it.

Kenny left for Israel, promising to send suitable books to help the children to start learning Hebrew. This gave me an excuse to spirit away the television and although the children at first put up a performance about it, they soon realised that they couldn't study and watch TV simultaneously. In any case we had no intention of taking the telly with us.

The travel agent was the first stop on our next trip to Melbourne. After considering the choices of flying or travelling by ship, the family made a unanimous decision on the latter. On looking back, we realise it was a very wise move as the ship called in at different ports, and we were very well looked after during the five week voyage.

The house was sold, the packing was finished and everything else was finalised. It was two days before we sailed. We booked into a Melbourne hotel and a large gathering of family and friends came to see us on our way. Four cars were required to transport us all down to the port. As the ship came into view, little doubts began to creep into my mind. Was this the right thing to do? Would the children adapt to a strange country and different culture? Would it be as easy as Esther and I had hoped? Would Kenny have everything ready for us? All these thoughts ran through my mind as we went aboard but it was too late for regrets. We were too far committed to turn back, we would have to cross those bridges as we came to them. Before the ship sailed we all gathered together for a final drink and farewell and I could see some very sad faces but once the visitors had gone ashore and we were ready to sail we all brightened up considerably and started to look forward to the new horizons ahead.

The children and their luggage were quickly whisked away by the stewards to their respective cabins and once they were settled in and knew how to find their way back to us again they went off to explore the ship from end to end. They could wander unhindered except for the Engine Room and Bridge, but were later taken on a tour to these places by members of the crew who kindly answered all their questions. The children had their own dining

room with Chinese stewards to look after them and also a swimming pool. At the front of the ship, with a view of the sea, they had a room called the Jungle Room. It was beautifully fitted out to look just like a jungle and there they could play games, buy ice-cream and other goodies, play the juke box and watch films till bedtime. They were very well looked after and by checking the daily children's programs, we knew exactly where to find them if needed. Rodney, the youngest, was the first to want to go to bed and asked for his panda. Esther produced a big new panda which had a music box inside but Rodney wanted his old one. We tried to explain that his old panda had a chewed face and feet and the stuffing was falling out, but he couldn't be consoled and lay awake for two hours until Esther finally fetched his old battered panda from our cabin. She had hidden it hoping to dispose of it later but the chewed up bear brought a smile to his face and within minutes he was fast asleep. He never did take to the new panda and the one with half the face missing continued to be his favourite and he still has it to this day.

Our first evening meal on board was far from a success. It seemed that fifteen year old Terry was in the mood to embarrass us. When the steward came to collect our order for the first course, Terry ordered spaghetti with cheese and tomato sauce which was on the menu but when it was time to order soup, Terry said that he wanted more spaghetti. The steward was taken aback but returned with our soup and more spaghetti for Terry. Now when the time came to order for the main course, the steward turned to Terry and what do you think? He said, "More spaghetti, please, and take all these spare eating tools away as I won't need them." That was the last straw. We told him that he shouldn't ask for the same course again as it would throw the cooks out of their routine but he had that stubborn look that we all knew so well on his face. The steward went off to talk to the chef who was chatting to other passengers. The steward returned with our meals, then brought a large silver salver with a lid on it and placed it in front of Terry and left with a grin on his face. Terry lifted the lid to find about six helpings of spaghetti lying there. People sitting near us thought it a great joke and laughed about it but we didn't. I assumed that they must have cleaned out all the pots in the kitchen for Terry. After that meal we changed Terry with Alan, his older brother, who was sitting at another table.

Singapore was our first port of call and before we went ashore Esther suggested that we give the kids some spending money so that they wouldn't have to keep asking us whilst we were in the shops and give them some independence. We were very proud of Evelyn, Judy and Terry as they bought themselves watches which appeared to be good quality but on arrival back at the ship, Judy's watch stopped and wouldn't go again. As the boat was leaving the next morning we decided to return to the shop and when we confronted the owner, he just glanced at the watch, put it aside and asked Judy to select a replacement without any hesitation or argument. About a week later Terry's watch also stopped. I found a chap who had worked in a watchmaker's shop to look at these watches for me. At first glance they looked to be of a good make, but upon opening, he found the inside parts to be rubbish and not made by the same firm as the cases. I don't know how many people were swindled in this way.

At Bombay, a young fellow joined the ship and almost from the first day, began following Judy around. Esther and I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary as he kept his distance whenever we were about. Judy was surprised when he announced his intentions to her, so she told us all about it. Apparently this twenty year old Moroccan was planning to settle in Israel. He was looking for a bride and liked Judy so much that he wished to marry her. When we confronted him, we found that he was not joking but was quite serious and asked if he could call upon her and pay her respects when we were in Israel. We informed him that Judy was only eleven years old and had

another five years of schooling to finish so he had better look in greener fields. He replied that this was not unusual in his country but we told him to leave her alone and refused to give him our address in Israel. Apparently this message got through to him as he avoided us for the rest of the journey.

As the ship neared Aden I began to look forward to this interesting place that I had visited twice before. If any place had the feel of the mystic east, it was here. The bazaars were fascinating and one didn't need any stretch of the imagination to visualise what intriguing things went on there. Like most places in the Middle East, Aden doesn't change much with time. I was to be sorely disappointed as on the night before our intended arrival we were told that we would not be calling in at Aden owing to very serious trouble there. There must have been a quick change of plans as in the early hours of the next morning the ship pulled in as close as safety would allow and stopped for about an hour. It was only later in the morning that we learned what had happened when we saw all the new faces of the women and children who had joined us. The captain had stopped and evacuated as many of these British people as possible from the port. They told us that they had been waiting at the port for two days for a ship to rescue them and they had fled from their homes leaving everything, cars and personal belongings. The only regret was having to leave the men ashore. We heard some very sad stories about the troubles they had endured in the previous month. The passengers all clubbed together to help them with clothing and offered to look after the children, but the children were too scared to leave their mothers.

Suez was our next port of call. Before our arrival, the Egyptian Coastal Police boarded our ship and asked all who wished to leave the ship at Suez and rejoin at Port Said to hand in their passports. Alan, Bruce, Rodney and I decided to go while the others remained on board. As our visas for Israel were on separate forms we left them in our cabins and handed in our passports showing only our trip from Melbourne to Naples. We had no trouble and were handed back our passports with the requested stamps on them. We left the ship at 2 am, boarded a bus heading from Cairo and arriving at dawn. The guide on the bus who told us that he was paid by the Tourist Ministry, was a tall thin fellow about fifty years old. His four prominent gold teeth protruded over his bottom lip and the remainder of his teeth were black stumps. It was hard to look at his ugly face without laughing. All through the journey he would keep jumping up and calling out "Everybody happy?" This seemed to be all that he could do. The passengers soon began watching him closely and when he started to stand up, we would all call out in chorus, "Everybody happy?" and he would frown at us. Perhaps this is what he was paid to do and we were depriving him of his living.

In Cairo we toured the usual sites, the museum and the pyramids, etc. and really enjoyed ourselves. On the way to the pyramids some people offered us a camel ride to the site for one dollar, so Bruce and I hopped on. About halfway there the driver of Bruce's camel stopped and asked for another two dollars, but Bruce refused to pay more than the agreed price which was on the notice board. At this the camel driver began to belt into the camel which made it gallop all the rest of the way. How Bruce didn't fall off I will never know, but he was still on top at the end, and complained of a sore tail for a long time afterwards. Late at night we left Cairo, travelled to Ismalia and then on to Port Said where we rejoined the waiting ship. When we were all safely gathered in and heads counted, the ship sailed for Naples.

Whilst in Egypt, we noticed all the activity in the army camps that we passed along the route. Even if it was moonlight, early morning or late at night, there was much activity in the camps. It was apparent that preparations were hastily being made for a special purpose. That was May 1967. Just before we reached Naples we were told that the Suez Canal had been

closed and many ships were trapped and in fact remained trapped there for years afterwards. Our ship had just missed being one of them so we considered ourselves very lucky.

Finally we arrived in Naples. Whilst waiting to leave the ship we filled in time watching the activity on the wharf below as they unloaded the cargo. We identified several of our boxes being lowered in the sling but before it reached the wharf, the rope broke and one of our boxes fell and broke open on the ground. Our belongings spilt out of the box and as the men on the wharf gathered up the contents we called out to them so they realised that the owners were watching. This must have saved many of our things from disappearing. As soon as we were able, Bruce and I went straight to the luggage shed and seeing our goods laying about, asked for a hammer and nails to repair the box. They refused to let us in or touch our things even though we had papers to prove ownership. Arguing was pointless. Again the next morning we were met with refusal. We wandered about and eventually received some advice from another man waiting for his luggage. He told us that in Italy you can only live by bribery and that we should offer them money and see what happens. Once more we returned to the luggage shed, this time putting ten dollars on the counter with our request to let us fix our box, but "No", they said, "We fix". We watched as they quickly bound it all up like new again. It was said that in Italy, one had to bribe people if you wanted a kind smile.

We only stayed on in Naples for a few days waiting for our passage to Haifa, but while there we spent a day at the excavated city of Pompeii. This city had remained buried under volcanic lava for about twenty centuries. We found this place so interesting that it was hard to leave, it was a great journey into the past.

From Naples we sailed directly to Haifa. At the wharf we were met by Asher, Ken and the usual array of officials. We hadn't heard from Ken for a month and the news he had for us was very upsetting.

Chapter 30

Israel

Everything had changed. Ken had had a wasted trip to Ashkelon because all the people directly responsible for our settlement arrangements had been called up by the army and nobody could help him. It was suggested that we go to a new development town, Carmiel, near Akko (Acre) until everything in the country settled down again and the people in Ashkelon could contact us.

So we went to Carmiel. There was much to do to get us settled before dark. People had worked hard to find the necessary furniture and bedding, some of which they loaned us until our boxes were released from the wharf. Everything was primitive but we managed. The children were not very impressed with the place as it was a development town and only part of it had been completed and many buildings were under construction. What they most objected to was the block of flats. They were used to their own home with plenty of land around. Here they were restricted to their own rooms, but I tried to console them by explaining that it would only be for a short time. Esther didn't complain even though I knew that she was upset by the noise and dust coming from the building sites all around us. There was nothing we could do to make things easier as it was summer and we needed the windows open to let in the cool sea breezes.

One week later Bruce and I found our first job. It was on a building site but it only lasted just four hours. After starting at six in the morning we stopped for breakfast at eight. While we were eating, the Arab labourers who were listening to the radio became very excited, packed up their meals, returned their tools to the shed and hurried off the job. Bruce went to find out what had happened and returned with the news that war had broken out. At ten o'clock the foreman arrived to tell us to go home as they were closing up until further notice. It was the fifth of June, 1967, my fiftieth birthday and ironically the war would last six more days, finishing on Esther's birthday, the twelfth of June. This remarkable event would be known as "The Six Day War" with Israel soundly thrashing the three Arab armies who had attacked them.

I said to Bruce, "Let's go and see if Mum has something nice to eat." Esther had her ear glued to the radio and gave us all the up to date news. Bruce, Alan and Terry offered to join the army but were told that they couldn't do security work as they had not been in the country long enough and didn't know the language. There was nothing they could do to help. Next we tried to get Terry and Alan into an Ulpan (Hebrew studies) but this drew a blank, many teachers had been called into army service and Terry was under eighteen years and not old enough for Ulpan. Back in Australia, David, the eldest son, was worried because of the news from Israel so he sent a telegram asking if we wished to return. None of the family wanted to go. They said, "Dad, we are here now and we'll stick it out. We couldn't run away at a time like this", so I wrote a reply telling him that we were staying put.

We stayed in Carmiel for six months with Bruce and I finding only part time work but our earnings were not enough to keep us in food. Ken had intended to join us in Carmiel but there was no prospect of work so he preferred to stay on at the kibbutz. Our savings and patience were running out. The war had been over for some time and still many places had not recommenced their work. We still hadn't heard anything from Ashkelon and the replies to our enquiries were not encouraging. The Council Office told us that the people responsible for our settlement still hadn't returned from the army and unemployment was very high in Ashkelon. We were pretty brownd

off and frustrated from wasting our time and money sitting in Carmiel. Bruce decided to visit Ken and see what kibbutz life was like, so off he went for the day. Three days passed and still he hadn't returned, so Alan suggested that he should go to see what had happened to Bruce. Alan departed but four days later we hadn't heard from him also so Esther began to wonder what kind of place this must be to swallow up our family one by one.

The next day was the Sabbath (Shabath) and although no public transport was available, we hitch-hiked to the kibbutz to sort this problem out. After a few enquiries we found Ken's room and there were the three boys together. Ken was now working in the plumber's workshop, Bruce had found a job in the metal workshop and Alan on a lathe in the factory. They were just preparing to come and see us to let us know that they were working as volunteers in the kibbutz. The boys were very happy and wanted to stay for a while so we asked Ken to enquire if there was room for us all so that the family could be together again. In Carmiel at that time was a South African family with six boys who had lived on another kibbutz some years before, had left Israel and come back again. Like us, they had decided to return to the kibbutz at the same time as we were trying to make up our minds. They encouraged us to try kibbutz life. A few days later we were invited to Kibbutz Kfar Hanassi to come for an interview and there, arrangements were made for us to go for a twelve month trial period. This would give us time to see if we could integrate into kibbutz life and give the members time to judge if we were suitable and could fit into this way of life. Ultimately this would be decided by a vote of kibbutz members at a general meeting. Once again we packed all our possessions and loaded them into a truck supplied by the kibbutz and headed for our new home.

Alan and I stayed behind for a few days to do a repair job. With the permission of the housing authorities we had removed a wall between our two flats as it was inconvenient going through the public corridor every time to get to the other flat. Now that we were leaving the wall would have to be replaced, plastered and painted to leave everything as we had found it. We spent a few bitterly cold nights as the old abandoned kerosene heater we found only smoked us out. The old saying, where there's smoke there's fire just isn't true. Kerosene heaters are very good when they work properly as we used them in the kibbutz for the next ten years.

Rodney, Judy and Evelyn joined their respective school classes and they found it very hard for the first year until they got a good grasp of Hebrew. I began work in the carpenter's workshop and Esther started work in the clothing store. The family picked up the language quickly but I couldn't master it at all. My bad hearing didn't help matters either. I didn't learn enough to carry on a conversation so I decided to steer clear of it altogether, better that, than not being able to give a clear answer when asked a question. Our settling in to kibbutz life went quite smoothly and soon we were too busy to spend time worrying about anything.

Our first winter in the kibbutz was very cold and wet but we were quite cosy in our little wooden home (called a Tsrif in Hebrew). The biggest problem was the mud. We had to wear rubber boots nearly all the time as there were few paths in that area.

One year later we shifted to another house, closer to other parents, which became our more permanent abode, making our old place available for more new candidates. Ken was first voted in as a member, then Bruce. Esther and I were too old for membership but were eligible to stay as "parents of members of the kibbutz". The family had completely lost interest in Ashkelon so we adopted the kibbutz as our future home.

Terry seemed to take the longest to settle in as he didn't make friends easily, and it took time for him to accept and adapt to them. Esther said that he caused her a few grey hairs worrying about him so much. For instance, our first Yom Kippur in Israel fell on his birthday so he invited some of his friends around for a party, but Esther said that there was to be no party as this was the day of fasting, not feasting. I tried to reason with him but he wouldn't listen and said nothing ought to be allowed to upset his party. He could be very stubborn, a quality that Esther believed he acquired from me, but strange things do happen. The following year Terry was the one who fasted!

You may be wondering, what is a Kibbutz? Let me explain for you.

There are about three hundred kibbutzim, mostly farming communities, in Israel. The Kibbutz society is a socialist co-operative community with strong idealistic aims. Their motto is "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs". Our kibbutz, Kfar Hanassi was started during one of the cease-fires in the Israeli War of Independence in 1948. The founding members are mostly from England and other Anglo Saxon countries. Today the community is largely dependent on the complex of foundry based factories which bring in about 70% of our income. Farming is one of the characteristics of kibbutz life and is rooted deep in the ideology of the movement. Every kibbutz is engaged in some type of farming. Here we grow cotton, avocados and grapefruit, raise chickens and sheep for the live market. About six hundred people live in Kibbutz Kfar Hanassi at present, one hundred of these are not permanent residents but are volunteers, visitors or part of a Hebrew study group (Ulpan). Among the permanent population are parents of members of the community, who wish to live near their children. The parents are not full members in that they have no voting rights in the General Assembly, but have all the other benefits that members have. There is a daily work schedule which is run by the Works Manager who ensures that all branches of the kibbutz receive the required manpower daily. Most members of the community have permanent or semi-permanent places of work and needn't refer to the work manager each day. Spare time social activities include sports such as basketball, rugby, soccer, swimming and tennis while there are evening classes for woodwork, pottery and other handicrafts. Many people play musical instruments and there is a jazz group, classic and folk group as well as a choir which on special occasions provides us with entertainment. From time to time lecturers, musicians and other professional entertainers come to the kibbutz to add variety to the local talent. The atmosphere is very relaxed and we have quite enjoyed living here within a community which has an open air country life and large family feeling. It has been a very good environment in which to bring up our children. Originally some of our kibbutz members came here from overseas as volunteers or to study in the Ulpan, returned home and later came back to settle permanently.

Bruce remembers his first day in the kibbutz. He spent that first day clearing chicken manure. The following day he joined the maintenance crew and for the next sixteen years worked and eventually managed the maintenance workshop. He saw it develop into a very large unit with sixteen workers, doing a variety of constructions, engineering works, factory maintenance, pipe lines and building projects. He had breaks in between to do his army service.

Alan joined the factory and worked for the first three years as a machinist there. Later he became an electrician and eventually made a name for himself as an all-round high class electrician with a special gift both in high tension electrical engineering as well as very complex electronics systems. This is very rare as most people concentrate on one sphere only.

Ken and I worked together as plumbers for the first two years in the kibbutz. Ken had trained as a telephone technician in Australia so went on to become an electrician in the kibbutz. Later he worked in the factory as a patternmaker. This is a highly skilled trade and he spent some time in the U.S.A. learning the finer points in aeronautical pattern design. The kibbutz factory has won world recognition as a supplier for aeronautical castings. Bruce also has qualified as an aeronautical aluminium alloys welder, one of only 27 such people in all of Israel.

In Australia I had always enjoyed making toys and children's playground equipment and have continued to do so in Kfar Hanassi. My dream was to create a Luna Park for the children in the kibbutz but the members couldn't grasp what I meant despite my pestering them for years about it. The only thing to do was to make some of the equipment by borrowing, begging or collecting discarded farm machinery, factory equipment and any other junk which could be converted into the desired playground equipment. Bruce and I spent many hours working in our spare time on this project and together we were eventually able to set up six units on the main lawns of the kibbutz for the children to try out. Once the children got to see and play on the merry go rounds and other games, there was no stopping us. My life's dream, a permanent playground set up with roundabouts, train, mini golf course, rifle range, guessing games, etc. has now become a reality. Five or six times each year this fully equipped fairground is in full swing for the children and those from neighbouring kibbutzim.

Judy also worked as a plumber with me for two years before she married. She has included hairdressing amongst her many jobs in the kibbutz and now works in the factory office.

Evelyn has also worked in a variety of jobs, including catering and administration.

Rodney, Evelyn and Judy went on to finish their schooling and each in turn went off to do their army service. This gave them more of a feeling of belonging, where before they had felt like trespassers. The girls in Israel do only eighteen months army duty compared to three years duty for the boys.

Rodney has always enjoyed drawing and cartooning and is now studying for his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Chicago, U.S.A.

At the time of writing, Alan, Bruce, Ken, Judy and Evelyn are still living in Kibbutz Kfar Hanassi with their families.

Terry has always been a bit unsettled. He returned to Australia a few years ago and lives part of the year in England, part in Australia.

Eddie thought that he would never see us again as we sailed off in 1967 but after his first visit in 1973, Eddie, together with his wife and family have travelled several times to Kfar Hanassi to spend time with us.

David and his family still live in Colac, Australia. Their daughter, Leanne came to spend six months with us in 1984.

Within the first few years of settling in Israel, both of Esther's parents died. Asher and his family are still living in Jerusalem and regularly keep in touch.

Chapter 31

A Return To The Past

Esther, my wife, died in December 1982 after a long battle with illness. Her death was a great blow to us and the children, grandchildren and I miss her very much. We had been married for over forty years, sharing the hardships and the good times together.

Early in my story I spoke about Uncle Jim, Aunty Laura and their three children, Ida, Tommy and Roy. Aunty and Uncle are no longer alive but my fond memories of them will always remain. Roy, his wife Dorothy and daughter, Sue came for a week's visit and we spent so many happy hours chatting about old times. This was Sue's third visit to the kibbutz. After her first visit, Sue's parents had realised that I was not a cousin or distant relative. It came as quite a surprise to Roy to learn that I had just been a lonely sore footed swagman who had come in from the cold.

Sue had been travelling around the world for several years visiting us first after Algiers and staying for three months as a volunteer, then from Egypt when she stayed for two months. She has become like a granddaughter to me. Since that first letter from Algiers we have corresponded regularly and I have been able to follow all of her travels. Her visits have brought my life around full circle since that day over fifty years ago when her grandparents took me in and looked after me till today when I am able to look after Sue when she comes to visit. It was Sue who first got me interested in making a trip back to Australia.

Two years after Esther died I met Rachel who infected me with her travel bug so I began to think about travelling again. Early in 1985 we began to plan a trip to England to attend the wedding of a young friend who had been a volunteer in Kfar Hanassi. After encouragement from family and friends, I extended my travel plans to include a return trip to Australia.

I had not been away from the kibbutz for more than five consecutive days in the past eighteen years so I was really looking forward to this holiday. I was excited at the prospect of once again seeing my family and old friends who had continued to keep in touch with me over the years.

This trip to Australia, after all those years away, represented an important link in the chain of my life's events. Those meetings were bitter sweet. Bitter because I was reminded how we all had aged and sweet because it was so good to see my old friends and share our memories of times gone by.

I remember so well Aunty Laura's words spoken all those years ago, "Your family tree is dying and even though the branch is still there, the limbs are falling off. I want you to do nothing to disgrace the branch and maybe some day, new limbs will grow again." Yes, Aunty Laura, I have nine children and eleven grandchildren living in three continents, so the tree is growing strong and continues to grow new branches.

What more could I wish for than to have had a full life, a loving and understanding family and no regrets.

"I'm just a country boy, money have I none.

But I've silver in the starlight and gold in the morning sun."