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Towards the light : A fictionalized (auto) biography

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Towards the Light

(A fictionalized (auto) biography)

**A Thesis submitted by
by**

John Cailes
MA(ECU), B.Lit.Comm.(Murdoch), Dip Ed.(UWA)

**for the requirements of
Doctor of Philosophy (Writing)
in the**

**Faculty of
Community Services, Education and Social Sciences,
Edith Cowan University**

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January, 2005

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract:-

Towards the Light — at times biographical, autobiographical, and basically fiction — is built out of anecdotes supplied to me as the result of direct questioning of my parents and relatives, and from my own memories of past experiences; from private 'on the ground' observations both in Western Australia and in Cornwall, England — and, where factual information is lacking, a good deal of creative invention on my part.

My paternal great-grandfather who at the age of eight began his working life in a Cornish tin mine provided me with a figure central to my purpose while constructing this narrative. To this character I have added details borrowed from or inspired by events that at times affected various other members of my family and those to whom they were devoted. Notable contributors to the composite character to whom I have given the name of Harry Coates, and to his family, are my father, his brothers and my own siblings. I suspect that I, too, appear reflected in the main text; but in general I have tried to contain my overt self within the autobiographical accompaniment that appears at the head of most chapters of the work.

My over-arching interest, however, is in representing ordinary people such as inhabit the mostly anonymous majority of any society, the name-less ones whose existence is often only inferred in official histories; people such as the other forty-nine milliners and dressmakers besides Ann Haynes in Perth, for instance, to whom Tom Stannage refers in his *The People of Perth* (1979:114) or just a sample of the reported 8000 by which the Western Australian (white) population grew in the period 1870-1884 (Crowley, 1964:33) — men and women who go about the vital business of their own survival.

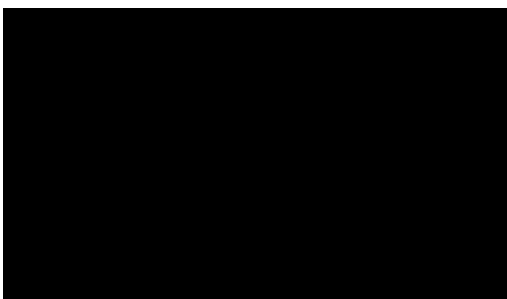
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text, or
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I also grant permission for the Library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.

Signed



Date: 8.10.05

Acknowledgements:

My thanks go to Dr Cynthia Vanden-Driesen and Mr Keith Truscott for their advice and commentary in matters related to the preparation and presentation of this thesis.

As ever reliable, my wife Sandy must be added to my list of helpful advisors. Without her regular infusion of enthusiasm I very much doubt that this project would ever have been completed.

TOWARDS THE LIGHT

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TOWARDS the LIGHT

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER One

My life began, as near as I can guess, the night Pavlova danced at the Maj. My pining mother lay among her pillows in a two-roomed hut assigned to the orchard labourer. The labourer, my father, an atypical country boy with a photographic memory and a taste for the poets of the Victorian era, was as abominably poor as the next man. Think not that my mother was unlicensed to recline where she did, or that the sole furniture of the cottage consisted of pillows; but the imagery seemed appropriately in keeping with that view of her condition she ever most favoured.

The name "Pavlova" was on everybody's lips. The great dancer was actually in Perth! At His Majesty's theatre! My mother did so want to see her dance. Father, a kind heart, too wanted my mother to be pleased. Examining his purse and finding it to be, as usual, holding little more than a long-since drawn raffle ticket which even he, romantic fantasiser that he was, saw no prospect of exchanging for a train ticket to the city, he did the next best thing. Without a moment's further cogitation, he whipped off his labourer's trousers, retained his labourer's shirt, donned his labourer's hob-naileds and, whistling a merry air, commenced to prance about the candlelit boudoir in a manner well enough, so he believed, as to delight any balletomane.

Had the light been stronger, who knows what might his leaping have revealed? My mother, possessed by now of more than a working knowledge of the functional parts of mankind, became convulsed. The more she laughed, the more vigorous became my father's gyrations, the higher in the air he flew. He was a sugar-plum fairy mincing, modest eyes downcast, a fiery Cossack in swishing cape, a swan dying rather rudely, the pantomime end of a horse – all these without a change of costume. I was begat in the middle of a pas de deux. My passionate love of music tells me this. I attribute my existence to the night Pavlova danced at the Maj. But more interesting to me than my life was that of my forebears — the life of my great-grandfather, especially, although by no means in telling his story will I neglect to mention my paternal grandmother whose energy, enthusiasm and devotion to her family, along with her opposite number on the maternal side, made all the members of her subsequent generations possible.

My great-grandfather's name was Sam. Like Harry Coates he was a Cornishman, a tin miner who as a lad spent the few hours away from his labours on the Wheal Daisy in the relatively fresh air of the nearby village of Higher Meliot, where at the time Harry's story begins, that young man had lived for the days of his weeks with his widowed Ma, his young brother Thomas and, for one Sunday a month, with his sister Belinda who worked as a housemaid up at the Hall.

* * * * *

At first, Harry Coates had thanked God for sparing his life. He must be favoured, he felt sure; although he did wonder about his mates.

Bit by bit the granite above his head was giving way. Splintering flakes of it shed like rifle-shots. With this easing of resistance, the earth above him creaked and settled anew, bringing with it a microscopic reduction in the headroom above the entombed lad.

Had any of his mates survived? Any of them? Perhaps they – all of them – were trapped, like himself, wet, shivering, frightened no matter how they tried so hard to tell themselves other mates would soon get them out?

Harry tried shouting their names!

Were they dead?

The sound of his voice was strange. It had no resonance. At heart young Harry Coates knew it was hopeless. At heart he knew too that he shouldn't give in. Men had survived in what, to hear 'em talk about it later in the kidliwinks, must have been bloody worse than this.

That awful creaking above him that signalled inevitable death registered on him though like the inexorable approach of a song's final note, every time followed by a minute rill of loose stone that reminded Harry of the dry, cold echoing rasp of the chapel organ's bellows.

A shard of the rock dislodging from the ground above him struck him on the arm. Harry was able to lift the candle high enough to allow an inspection of his roof, to make out the huge lump of ore supporting it and to silently, wonderingly, reluctantly comprehend the immense weight of unstable rock which, between himself alive and certain death, this slowly, dreadfully yielding block was the only intervention.

How long he had lain there, Harry could never know. Was it an hour ... a day? It had been Saturday when he went down the mine. He knew that much. But he felt his mind was numb; useless. On the blank wall of his reason there seemed to appear images, pictures,

scenes from above ground, from former experiences. At once he imagined himself breathing the free, sweet air of normal men — not the damp, acrid, cold vapours of unnaturally disturbed ground the miner was used to.

Was he going to die? Was this all he had lived for ... he, Harry Coates of Higher Meliot? And was the record of all his small life's memories going to just be blotted out and mean nothing at all?

Harry knew that from Sparrowfield to Ralston Bridge was no more than a mile. Westward, towards the river, a high bank of wooded hills filled the view. Before the hills ran the gentle stream of Hellon which, in winter was a torrent but in summer, as now, could be crossed either by the old stone, hump-back bridge or forded quite easily on foot. Would he never hear those trilling waters again nor feel their gushing coolness on his skin some warm, summer Sunday? And snow? What of snow, that lay so clean and white on the landscape and covered all its uglinesses for such a little while?

The air in his living tomb was foul. Now, he was without light. The once-comforting stub of lighted candle had long-since guttered, had long-since flickered out, just as Harry knew his life must simply fade away, unless the gradually weakening ground above him gave way in a rush, in which case he would have no longer to wait, to agonize over the slowness of his rescuers.

Sheltering below the hills, away from the wind which swept in from the sea, there was Warren Hall, occupied by Richard Shaddick and his family. Shaddick, of Wheal Daisy, the rich and influential tin miner, who was knighted in '46 following his gifts to that London charitable trust. "Harry Coates, miner, of Wheal Daisy, as the result of an accident. Sadly missed." That would be me, Harry Coates, from this day, or night, on.

His brain was confused. Was he mad ... yet?

Above Sparrowfield stood Cavey Wood. Beyond it rose the high Meliot Crag where on balmy Sundays, after Chapel, ragged young village lads, released for a day from their labours at the mine, would be playing. They would act out their young dreams just as Harry himself had done years before. In those dreams the dark reaches of the forested slopes were filled with wily dragons to be slain, evil wizards to be out-foxed, and hideous monsters from whom terrified and screaming fairy-like girls had to be rescued.

Today, if it was Sunday yet, there would be young brother Tom and his cousin Wyn who, having paid their expected dues by attending the Chapel Sunday school, would be now looking forward to an uninterrupted afternoon of play below high Meliot. The boys

would have made their preparations in great excitement. Their bag, that the furtive Wyn probably had earlier wrested from the racks in his mother's kitchen pantry, is filled with a small cake, four slices of bread and a heel of old cheese. He now has it slung over the his little shoulder and is wearing it as proudly as any boy would wear his bag on his way, like his father, to his first core at the mine — poor little skerrick After that, Harry knew only too well, the trip up the hill to grey stone building with the chimney was not such a joyous venture, as this marked the existence of a vast underground labyrinth filled with all manner of noises fit to terrorize a boy.

.

Sometimes Harry slept, only to wake up sweating even more profusely, afraid that during his loss of consciousness, men listening for his sounds of life had despaired of ever locating him so had withdrawn from the search ... that surely must be going on, somewhere around him? Then, desperately, Harry would take up the loose piece of rock which was his only signalling device and pound away too vigorously so that weariness would precipitate him into an inner void of despondency. Soon, he would fall asleep, again.

... but today, the sun was shining, Cavey Wood was before them and a long, somnolent summer afternoon free of care was eagerly anticipated. Rapidly the lads climbed, negotiating rock and fallen logs as easily as pursued rabbits, shouting, whistling, full of rubbish as natural boys are, until they reached Merlin's Rest, so-named because of the strangely-formed hollow in the hillside where grown-ups often were to be found in pairs taking their ease among the ferns growing there in abundance. On any day but Sunday, if lad there be who had time for it, the outlook from Merlin's Rest would be filled with another set of details just as arresting as a boy, on Sunday, might find the sight of Maggie Treloar, her heels in the air and her calico bloomers hung on a gorse, with the bare buttocks of Sammy Harris aclenching away between her legs. O yes! On any other day but Sunday, off across the village below the Agate Tor, would be the stack of the Wheal Daisy's engine house belching acrid coal-fire smoke, the spider-webs of the new-fangled headframe, the winder and pump house and the dry where the miners coming up as usual soaked to the skin kept their dry clothes and their wet ones slung over the steam pipes. Ant-like men and bigger horses dragging the drays would be seen and he would hear the rattle of skipped ore dribbling down the slides and into carts, creaking machinery and the clamour of the blacksmiths. Somehow on Sunday, all this, even the mullocky skrimp, seemed to blend and disappear into the landscape, especially if it was a sunny Sunday. Then, not even the dreary

village could be noticed unless you wanted it to be, as when something you wanted badly was missing from your immediate surroundings like your dog or your Ma, your boyfriend or girlfriend; or food if your stomach was unusually empty ...

Harry stirred, felt his eyes open; saw nothing in the blackness surrounding him ... and resumed his dreaming.

... unless there was in you a longing, Sundays made everything about the mine, the village, even the rotten weather, just disappear for a while. On any other day but Sunday even Merlin's Rest was just a hole in the side of a hill. Then, always, even on a cold, drizzly Monday, such as Harry knew about from those brief weeks of "freedom" as he "broke in"; as he waited for his place underground on the Wheal Daisy with the wind sweeping in ... as you cringed to leeward of Big Barney and he struggled through the mud, his huge feet working like the pistons of a mighty pump, slow and inexorable too, hauling out the waste to the sands ... there was behind, ahead, beside you the far-off grey and greasy sea that on special days turned blue ... the fickle ocean you could at least remember turning blue, as happened on days when it relented and made itself a picture fit to hang in Warren Hall, so Belinda said ... Long swells were running heavily into the bay. They curled, white foamed, cold; tirelessly crashing against the torn, disfigured rocks bravely forming the lower bastion of the land.

Green and grey beneath a metallic, sometimes white hazed summery sky, the rolling, heaving ocean flung itself thunderously against the Cornish coast, watched by a pair of eyes no less wondering than those of other men who, just as apprehensively had stood upon the cliffs and, mystified, had stared fearfully at this display of natural, destructive power.

Further out, beyond the boiling, confused currents of waves destined for the shore, on the smoother yet seething mass of the sea, a ship fled southwards before a freshening wind, her sails full, her bow-wave rising a quarter of her length as, leaning away landwards, her three sheet-laden masts dipped, as though in farewell salute.

The lone watcher on the cliff turned away. With disconsolate tread he drew back towards the simple farm house above the village then disappeared as he traversed the woody undulations where the trees intervened. North, the fuming engine-house stack sent out its poisonous air and the wind bore it downwards with the clattering of the ore, the rumble of the water wheels, chatter and rhythmical thump of the stamps, of hammers, the

hissing, screeching sounds of the steam winder and the pump; with the occasional sounds of men. Somewhere, a dog howled for its absent boy-keeper; but the village was quiet.

Harry had heard stories of miners, like himself trapped underground by rock-falls, stories brought to the surface by “lucky” ones who had been rescued ... eventually. Some had seen visions, awful things, indescribable horrors. Some had been brought to the surface gibbering wrecks and had remained so for months.

Most of these men — and there were dozens of them — were never the same again nor of any use either to themselves or to their families if they had them. Harry wondered about himself ... if he were to be rescued, though that didn't seem likely, since he'd heard nothing but the creaking ground above him, the angry sound of suspended earth held frustrated apart from its natural rest. The once-substantial lump of rock that had formed his compartment's ceiling had crumbled under weight and lay now almost beside him, it having almost fretted away as it succumbed to the pressure which loaded it. His heart beating like a drum, his own voice crying out ‘Help!’ — less frequently now — and the rhythmical, creeping, creeping sound of the rock wall mockingly, gloatingly advancing ... the ore must crumble altogether soon! Would his mind snap before the end? Or must he remain conscious and aware, right to the finish! Conscious? Was that consciousness, or lunacy? Had he really been ... of course! Dreams! Simply dreams ... cruel dreams ... dreams of pleasures passed. Mocking dreams. Would they never end? End ... ! end ... ! end ...

Harry began to cry. Dreams! But were they dreams? Such vivid images! He cursed. Would this torment never cease! Creak; creaking. In the darkness he reached up ... and cried out! He was sure he had had to reach much further the last time he had tested his head-room! This agony would be over, soon, he knew, and with it would end the terror of anticipating his final moment on earth. Harry felt his lips part and stretch into a grin ... his final moment in earth, he amended. At least they wouldn't have to go to the expense of burying him ... though he'd miss his bouquet of flowers sent down from the Hall. Dead miners who died from accidents — and he'd seen off quite a few of them, young and all as he was — always got a wreath of flowers from the Shaddicks ... Sods! ... Them Shaddicks in their snowy beds ... me here in this ... this ...

There was young Tom again, sitting in the kitchen reading aloud from his exercise book ... and Ma looking on so proud. Ma had never made out she was so proud of him, Harry.

Ever ... though, she always hugged him when on pay days he'd lay his shillings on the table for her.

It is doubtful if Annie and Jack Coates were inspired by any of the altruisms of a modern labour movement when they sent their two younger children, Belinda and Tommy, to Mr Sedges whenever they could afford it. More likely, their inspiration so to do was borne out of love, out of their solid support of Wesleyan self-sacrifice; but by the time they had caught it, during a particularly lean time when the price of tin collapsed and with it, the employment, hence lives, of many miners and their families, it was too late to console their eldest child who, at eight years of age, was already working a full shift underground at the Wheal Daisy or, when that work was not available, making himself useful around the fishing boats at Porthtuan.

Mr Sedges as a young man, an idealist, a schoolteacher, first came to the secluded fishing village of Porthtuan on holiday. Beguiled by a spell of that glorious weather whereby Cornwall, as surely as the Sirens lured Aeneas, dressed itself as a heaven's ante-room, and laid its green fields and blue ocean beneath a yellow sun to prove itself a tourists' paradise. Theophilus Sedges breathed the scented air of a singular geographical pocket of it then ecstatically declared all of Cornwall to be his own personal Nirvana. His soul was twitched out of him to romp and play among the daffodils and buttercups, his senses became intoxicated by the wafted blossom of the apple trees, while the flowers blooming in the gardens so beleaguered his eyes that all memories of lesser times were suppressed, partly by the drone of bees, partly by the lazy lapping of the sea water upon the bright, shingled shore, partly by his sight of the swirling sea birds shimmering with the sunlight upon their backs, circling indolently in the warming, clement Spring air.

Who knows how Mr Sedges' view of his recently discovered new Eden may have been coloured or how and to what degree his rapturous melodizing in that garden may have been modulated? Would this young, almost new-born in its innocence, unspoiled mind have comprehended the irony of his persuasion to regard his experience as an idyll, when barely three miles away, over the paper-cut-out hills delimiting the boundary of his view and the village of Meliot hosted the site and scene of what to many must be the ultimate terror, the absolute horror: that of being buried alive.

"Listen!" said a voice in the pitch darkness, Harry was sure of it!

“Meliot boasted no town hall; no hall, not even a public notice board.” It was Tommy speaking his “descriptive passage” as he said Mr Sedges, the schoolmaster had taught him. “Grey granite walls above a single street cobbled with grey granite slab-stones and grey slate roofs was Meliot. Yellow-green moss grew on some of the slates where the sun, when it shone, rarely visited. East, the moor; north, the sea; south, the Wheal Daisy and beyond that, perhaps another hundred mines the same, some with their impoverished villages, more than one or two workings close by towns.

To the east, towards the root of England’s tongue, lay Devon; to the west, more uprooted soil, more gullied landscape, more grey grey granite and finally, more sea. Cornwall, for the dispossessed majority, was an open prison. For others — just a few — it was the source of an unimaginably easy living.

Not all the inhabitants of Meliot — or of Warren Hall, for that matter — were content to remain, however, in the mould into which their birth had seen them poured. More slowly in these isolated parts of the country was coming the realization of the human individual’s right to life; a new understanding that life was not something necessarily granted by a god who at birth assigned one’s station in the world — which subsequently one deserted at one’s peril; that increasingly there really were opportunities in the world to be wrested for one’s self — albeit in many cases, out of the hands of those who possessed unfair advantages endorsed by laws and traditions of ages-long protection.”

‘Was Mr Sedges pleased with you, Tom lad?’ old Annie coaxed.

Tommy looked sheepish: ‘Mr Sedges said the writing was good; but he didn’t understand. Mr Sedges said that he hoped no-one would think he had taught me that stuff about the people. He said he thought what I had written might be thought sub...subversive, I think he said.’

Annie had told Tommy not to use those big words on her, Harry remembered. ‘Station in the world’? Me? Opportunities? What opportunity did he, Harry as-good-as-dead Coates have now? Ma! Oh Ma! Tommy! Belinda!’ Harry felt warm tears drench his cheeks.

He didn’t know how long it was before another, fainter, more insistent sound at last pierced the blackness of his despair. He had been trying to count the intervals between the speech of the strained rock against which he was trapped and ...

Harry had known ever since he had first entered the mine — as a child — that injuries, even death, were daily underground risks to be faced squarely enough. In his mind never had it been himself he saw as being under threat. Even when his own father slipped and fell at the 180 fathom, no personal note of self-preserving caution weighed upon him. His Da had a wimpy leg after a loose ‘un came off the hanging wall and dropped him as he passed below. His Da wasn’t up to climbing ladders. Everyone knew that.

So when his Da slipped at the 180 fathom and fell down the shaft, it wasn’t anything mysterious. And in two — three years at the most, they said — the ancient mines along with their traditional methods of working them would be dead; finished. Black tin, they said, would soon be imported. No more would the warren-like workings below ground be searched and searched again for the ever-meagre grains of Cornish tin that centuries of mining had made so expensive and difficult to win: Australia and such like places abroad had an abundance of the metal, all easily won — and gold.

Australia had gold. But did it have black, steamy holes and darkened galleries in which men un-naturally toiled wet with the sweat of their labours and from unexpressed and often unrealized fear? Did Australia have men bred to the belief that such a life was ordinary, common, usual, especially for young men in the prime of their youthful lives?

Free passages to places in the new worlds of Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, as well as Australia — were eagerly advertised throughout the county and just as eagerly read by those who could. Emigrants with only the most basic occupational skills would be welcome. The miners who lived in Harry Coates’s village were discontent though bore their labours philosophically; their womenfolk were as impoverished as their men, the children mostly hungry and dressed in rags. And the young whose hearts were yet fond enough to hope were confused by divided loyalties — between family and traditional ways of earning a living, against the advantages and opportunities that emigration seemed to offer.

For Harry Coates, however, lately by some miracle found half-dead and raving and rescued from the eighty-fathom on the Wheal Daisy, the question of emigrating was one for which he had neither wit nor inclination to ponder.

Yet the great hall of Warren was a majestic affair of considerable length and perhaps ten yards in breadth, its richly ornamented ceiling supported on polished, pink granite pillars arranged in pairs at either end, while geometrically-carved pilasters at intervals engaged the side walls.

Fireplaces of white marble stood well spaced, one on either side, while Elizabethan windows from floor to ceiling, draped in rich, hand-embroidered brocade curtains when drawn aside, allowed light to flood into the room.

Three magnificent crystal chandeliers hung from gilded ceiling bosses, while along the interior wall, large expensive mirrors threw back the light they received, creating a sensation of spaciousness reminiscent of the finest European palaces.

One end of the hall served as a dining room and there stretched an oak-plank board at least forty-five feet long, dressed with the finest silver plate, set to accommodate forty, while the remainder of the room, now carpeted in a covering of deep red, was strewn with divans, settees and deeply-upholstered wing chairs such as a gentleman might occupy, clothing loosened a little, to sleep off a jolly good dinner, or sip his port or brandy while engaging in some light conversation.

Beyond the great hall there were withdrawing rooms for the ladies, a smoking room and of course that indispensable adjunct to any family seat of note, the library, in which could be found tomes relating to the state of the county, statistical references to obscure realities and, in this particular area, the art, practices and results of tin-mining. Collected works also were to be discovered here, public reflections of their owners private aversions, may be, but essentially displayed as credentials of support for the societal status quo. The arts would here be rarely over-looked, with classic architecture prominent, painting and sculpture inevitably represented, its plated beauties expensively bound and held within embossed, gold-leafed leather covers. An ornately decorated orrery rested on a beautiful, inlaid mahogany table before a window where the natural light was strongest.

Behind the library and approached in such a way as to make its doorway easily overlooked was the entrance, however, to the heart-land of Warren Hall, through which passed only its master and his personal secretary. So private was this place that, extraordinarily, it was the same personal secretary to Sir Richard Shaddick whose duties included responsibility for keeping this secluded hide of his master's in order, ensuring its supply of heating coal, and topping up its brandy decanters. Once a month, Sir Richard allowed the cleaning staff entry, providing his secretary was available to supervise the sweepers and dusters. Except for these ordered violations of its sanctity, the air within the chamber was breathed by none, other than its master and that one hired minion, Johnathon Butler, secretary and general factotum extraordinaire.

While this den the two men occupied for at least some time of most days was approached from within the house through the library, an ante-room entered from the study, as Sir Richard liked his retreat to be known, led out to the gravelled drive at the side of the house. It was in this ante-room that Sir Richard and Butler kept in contact with the daily affairs of business. Here, the estate's steward might be interviewed, the mine manager, perhaps its chief engineer or geologist, though only rarely.

The ante-room had seen its bankers, investors besides; though generally only those who came to report or to receive instructions might be found there on a regular basis.

When thus, Harry Coates, recovering as best he could from the effects of his recent burying alive received a summons to attend the master up at the big house, his coming there was an extraordinary event.

Harry arrived at half past nine because his appointment, the messenger had said, was for ten.

It was a bitter morning, dark and raining heavily. Although he wore a scarf tucked into the neck of his rough-spun coat and a cap pulled down over his ears as far as he could get it, water trickled through these defences easily so the lad arrived cold and soaked at the heavy, nail-studded door of the master's office. The boy was nervous, too. This was the first time in his life he had had anything to do with an actual mine-owner — nor had any of his family or acquaintances except Old Olly's girl Marigold, and look where that got her. Though Belinda worked at the Hall, she had nothing to do with the Master. Her job was upstairs with the children — with young Master Robert, mostly, and his small sister.

But the messenger said Harry was to come — or settle for real trouble. So here he was, hammering on the door and no one coming, with the rain running down his back and making bogs in his best boots, below.

'Christ!' was all he could say, and that to himself. No bugger were going to answer his knocking. He thought he'd leave, then he thought he'd better not. 'A man's a pretty ass,' was one of Tommy's phrases that his mind presented him with; and just as it was about to formulate some words more appropriate to the occasion, the door opened to reveal to young Harry Coates the face of Jonathon Butler. He knew him ... him as was to be seen snoopin' around the smelter an' the coinage.

A raised eyebrow was the only greeting offered at first, then Butler said 'Harry Coates?' but it really wasn't a question. Of course he knew Harry. He had been at the adit when they

had brought the pathetic figure out into the light he'd been away from for the best part of four days. Butler had watched as the captain threw a sack over the lad's head to protect his eyes from the sudden brightness. He had watched as the boy struggled against the darkness and screamed, thinking he was back there in the incredible deafening loneliness of his recent tomb. That was six — maybe seven weeks ago.

'Your appointment was for ten. You see I opened the door at ten, precisely,' Butler advised, as though he wanted to be congratulated for his promptitude. Harry shivered but managed to stand still and not say awt.

'Sir Richard wishes you to know how much he admired your brave and successful escape from the pit.'

Harry just stared at the man.

Butler continued: 'Sir Richard and others still feel, however, that had the work underground been carried out in a professional manner, your recent discomfort might have been avoided.'

Harry could not prevent himself: 'Fifteen a' me mates are dead down there yet, y'know?'

'Of course I know! Fifteen men whose lives were wasted by ... '

'By what, Mr Butler ... ? By greedy bastards tryin' to git the last ounce outa 'er?'

'No!' Butler replied with vehemence. 'Your friends died due to their own incompetence. You must know that, Coates, surely!'

Tears sprang to Harry's eyes; occluded the sight before him — in an instant, as happened now whenever he became emotional. In his mind he was returned to the black solitude of the pit, unable to speak, shaking with fear, mentally decimated.

Butler began again. 'Sir Richard is anxious that you should be rehabilitated, nevertheless, Coates. He has reports of your condition. It is his genuine belief that it would be pointless for you to continue at the Wheal Daisy. Sir Richard of course understands that you are otherwise without skills. Sir Richard knows very well that if you cannot work at the mine then there is precious little else you are fit for.'

Harry accepted these blows without demur. There was a truth in what this man was saying — besides a good deal of untruth — yet how could he make a contest of it? He, Harry Coates, held no exploitable advantage. Butler would always be the winner and so, Shaddick as well. Just let him get on with it.

‘Sir Richard Shaddick is a generous and honourable man, Coates. You and your like must allow that.’

As Butler paused here, Harry managed a desultory ‘Aye, iz’ because he sensed more was coming and the sooner it was said the sooner he could begin trudging home and the sooner he could be standing by the fire and sipping his mother’s broth an’ warmin’ hissell by the pot hooks.

‘He (and here Harry understood “Shaddick”) is making you a very generous offer. Sir Richard is offering you a free passage to Australia, Coates, and ten pounds money to establish yourself there. No conditions are placed upon the offer except one.’

Harry blinked. It was all he could manage. He knew his mouth hung open but for the moment could do nothing about it. Ten pounds! He’d never ... never ... and what about the passage money? Pat Wilkins’d gone out last year without no sponsor — ter git away from that woman of his, ‘twas said ... cost ‘im seventeen pound steerage ... them’s ten pound and seventeen pound t’gether! And no strings ... except one?

‘Coates? Coates? Are you listening?’

‘Aye, iz,’ came in response, brighter this time.

‘The condition, Coates, that Sir Richard places upon your acceptance of his munificence is this: you must take the ship Dorian departing for South Australia next week. No other vessel will do. No other arrangements are possible. Do you agree? If so, I am empowered to advance you a further ten pounds immediately which you will need to outfit yourself for the voyage and provide yourself with supplies additional for your journey than those provided by Captain Sommers. Also, you must transport yourself to Plymouth, where you will need to arrive by Friday at the latest. The Dorian is indeed loading and may well depart ahead of time should winds and tide suit her. One final condition, Coates.’

Here, Butler eyed the drenched figure before him dispassionately, awaiting a response. Harry lifted his chin, perceptibly, but did not speak.

As if abruptly dismissing some retort as though it would be worthless made before this clumsy intelligence, Butler concluded: ‘If I am correct in believing that you accept Sir Richard’s considerate offer, Coates, I must warn you that you must tell no-one — absolutely no-one — of the details of this conversation. You must leave the village and the mine without farewells of any sort, immediately. Action will be taken, should you not do so.’

Thinking his own thoughts, Harry faced Butler squarely, silently, for some moments, then nodded his agreement, which he sealed with a single word.

“Aye.”

Butler then proceeded to produce the sums discussed and Harry’s passage document, finally thrusting forth a receipt for the miner’s signature, saying with a sneer as he did so: “You can sign your name, Coates?”

‘Aye, can,’ came the laconic reply.

Butler made show of inspecting the paper. “Go,” he said, indicating the door with a nod towards it. ‘Don’t return, Coates.’ he added, as Harry, clutching the money and papers bestowed upon him, turned to leave.

‘What!?! Thirty-nine pounds ten shillings! You mean to say, Butler, that you’ve cost me thirty-nine pounds odd ... for what, exactly?’

‘For forgetfulness rather than remembrance really, Sir Richard.’

‘How do y’ mean?’

‘The sooner young Coates is away, the sooner all will be forgotten. The sooner full shifts can start again. The sooner the scare-mongers will quieten and the sooner the mine can fully re-open. The sooner the profits will be restored and ... the sooner the talk of unsafe management will be scotched, Sir.’

Richard Shaddick was silent, at first. Though Butler was no stranger to his employer’s moods he was not accustomed to sharing the man’s innermost thoughts or his complete trust. He knew Shaddick could turn upon him if it suited him as easily as the man would diminish, even crush, a business rival whose aspirations stood in the way of his own schemes or advancement. Richard Shaddick was ruthless and no more honest than circumstances demanded he should be. He was bombastic, domineering, egotistical and, so Butler believed, mostly unbeatable; yet to a skilful player such as Butler imagined himself to be, his employer’s obsession with that quest to count as leader in the tin mining field was the key to his vulnerability. There is a way to the soft underbelly of every man, every woman, and Butler had studied his target at quite intimate range. Shaddick’s weakness lay in his cravings and what the man coveted most was wealth. He pursued wealth and sensuality blindly. He was, like all people driven by an overwhelming interest, able to exclude any depth of feeling for anything else. Money, or rather the power of it and how, through its possession he could change and direct the life-courses of those around him gave

this man his greatest enjoyment. It followed, Butler reasoned, that the thing most likely to strike the worst fear in the mind of his employer would be an action or situation likely to attack the roots of his present good fortune. By awakening the magnate to the idea of something or someone having the capacity to destroy even the minutest part of his conquered territory — in this case and at this stage of his career, near half the wealth of the tin mines west of the Tamar — it was but a simple matter for Butler to order the subjection or the displacement of who or whatever represented the embodiment of that threat. Disposing of Harry Coates was almost a trivial act, Butler mused with unspoken satisfaction.

‘This conversation never took place, Butler. Brandy?’

CHAPTER Two

What happened in the years before the tobacco tin is a mystery. I rely completely upon historians to cover this period. So the accuracy of the information which follows or leads up to the point where my memory awaits me is a greyish tale as swishable as any other. Let me indeed adopt, at least for a page or two, the historian's pleasure and rummage among the morsels of the reported past.*

**The lid of the tobacco tin, when thrown against the house wall, flew open. To my then inexperienced four year-old mind, the significance of this event for two years reigned supremely mysterious, only to be eclipsed for me then by the Bible story of Moses striking that rock.*

* * * * *

1874

‘Cap’n Sommers be a tragic man, as it ‘appens, young Miss, so I’d be a bit charitable like about ‘im if I wuz you,’ the sailor was saying as Harry entered.

The sea was calm, too calm for a sailor. Three knots in the so-called “roaring forties” was just fine for one young man. For Harry the conditions could be better only if the ship floated on liquid glass and the air moved only perceptibly. A month of rough weather had left its mark on those on board the Dorian no more than on himself. His stomach ached, his head was feverish; his spirits so low that he wondered if he would survive to finish his journey. Four weeks at the Cape while storm damage to the battered ship was repaired had given him a chance to recoup although the slowness in him of regaining his former youthful health and mental attitudes sometimes drove him to despair of ever making a full recovery. Daily, and sometimes more often, the enormity of his act of migration threatened at least once to swallow him, just as would the endless ocean upon which this flimsy Dorian seemed to him to be so insecurely set might gulp down every last plank and sail of the ship and all the creatures dependent upon it. For the second time in his life, Harry felt a loneliness that drew him to the brink of despair and, at night, the creaking of timbers and rigging, the moaning of the sails-impeded winds filled his silences and made him cry out with the terror of it. In the dark hold filled with shadows and creakings akin to the pitch awfulness of his candle-lit tomb in the mine, Harry wept himself to sleep.

Two days more days out from the Cape, the Southern Ocean put at nought the progress the boy had made towards his ship-board rehabilitation — two days out, that seemed like

only moments, before the now familiar oppression of sea-sickness blanketed his humour and wiped all conjectures except that of probable death from his consciousness. Harry thought of his mother and how she might have responded to the ship's continuing trials at sea. Annie Coates would have said that for sure, there was a rabbit aboard the Dorian — at least one, maybe a pair. Harry managed a smile as he recalled how the whole mine workforce underground had been brought to the surface and the operation stopped that day at the Wheal Daisy when Billy Carvossa, finding a rabbit drowned on the ninety-fathom plat, panicked the miners into believing a cave-in was about to overwhelm the workings.

Another calm, and a longer abatement of the sea's fury now seemed in prospect despite the crew's condemnation of the gods responsible for the lack of wind. The young Cornishman, still with his miner's outlook on things corporeal, was unable to raise the least regret for the ensuing tranquility around him.

'And why would I be kind about Captain Sommers?' enquired the young Miss archly.

'He be a very sad man, Miss,' the middle-aged sailor replied, his lined, pasty features drawn into an expression appropriate to the tone of his words. On land, at this moment, and suitably dressed, his manner of speech aside apart from its intonation, he might have passed easily for a curate. In his once-white overshirt, a red sweat rag about his neck and sailor's bags of a greyish canvas, the whole of him supported on sandalled, not especially clean feet, Grimbald the overseer boatswain and sort of passengers' quartermaster, wasn't a sight to set a choir maiden's heart ablaze with gentle-womanly lust or even interest.

'I'm sorry to hear you say so, Mr Grimbald. Could I have a portion of flour and some raisins; a piece of suet, cheese, mine and my Aunt's ration of lime juice and ...' Rosa Compton read aloud from the list held in one delicately-fingered hand before her.

Grimbald regarded her steadily, making no move towards complying with her requests. 'I wuz sayin' about Cap'n Sommers, Miss ... go easy on the man, Miss. 'e's a goodun. None better.'

Harry, seated nearby, was snatched from his vale of self-commiserative contemplation with the first notes of Rosa Compton's words. His ear had been tuned to her music very early in the voyage and, had the girl known it, she might have worn his heart as her trophy from that moment on. But as a lad from the mines, expected to no more than tug his cap in acknowledgment of a lady such as Harry held Rosa to be, he saw the award of his love for her as a hopeless gesture and contented its yearnings with side-long glances, and pretended indifference.

‘I’m sure Captain Sommers is a good man, Mr Grimal. I simply remarked that I thought our stay could have been made shorter in Cape Town. The presence of a ship’s captain surely was not too much to ask for, once repairs had been made and fresh supplies had been loaded.’

‘I told you,’ Grimal defended: ‘Cap’n Sommers was at the hawspital wiv ‘is girl. ‘e thought she’d taken ill. Thank God it were nothin’ serious ... poor thing and ‘er wiv-out a muvver as ter give ‘er comfort. It breaks me ‘eart it does ter think uv ‘er.’

‘And it’s very kind of you, Mr Grimal, to think that way. But what is the child doing aboard ship in the first place, I would ask. She should be at school, for one thing.’

‘I agree entirely with that,’ — this from Mrs Forbes, a cabin passenger recently added to the ship’s passenger list at the Cape, who until this point had been waiting her turn at the galley door behind Rosa. ‘And in any case, my man,’ she addressed Grimal haughtily, ‘your good opinion of your superior officer is assumed. Kindly attend to this lady at once.’

Grimal looked the newcomer up and down. His lips moved. Instead of replying, the man contracted his brows; shook his head in Rosa’s direction. ‘Aye, ma’am. What wuz it you wanted, Miss?’

‘Flour, raisins, suet...oh! and sugar, plus the lime juice — for my Aunt, Mrs Capstock and myself please, Mr Grimal,’ Rosa read from her list.

Laboriously, the quartermaster placed crosses in relevant boxes upon the weekly issues inventory for the ladies Compton and Capstock. This done, the man then proceeded to dole out the items of food requested which, once apportioned on the large tinned plate Rosa presented him with for the purpose. She then set off towards her quarters serenely, with barely an interruption on account of the ship’s rolling movement. Walking ‘with the ship’ was an exercise Rosa had become mistress of in very quick time, weeks before.

Harry Coates remained at the long, communal table that ran down the centre of the passengers’ accommodation. He rested his head in his hands, his elbows to the board, his forearms creating a triangular support beneath his chin. It was an attitude he had adopted whenever he was not prostrate in his bunk, or wandering about the deck talking to the crew and learning by observation the crafts of seamanship.

The young Cornishman had soon become a familiar figure among the other passengers, as well. To some who, like most, knew his story he was a figure of wonderment — a hero. Others chose not to dwell upon the details of his entrapment and subsequent rescue; but few

did not look upon him with compassionate gaze or without a sense of awe; without respect. He became something of a quiet sideshow. Before long, the details of his experiences below ground quickly grew into legend within the insular shipboard community.

That Rosa Compton caught Harry's eye from the very first was a natural thing. In his village, just out of Saint Ives on the south-west Cornwall coast, the girls were the hefty daughters of long-time miners' families. They were tough, knowing, brazen, lovable in their way, youthfully flirtatious, soon stultified by dull routine and long hours labouring as bal-maidens breaking rock for the stamps. Never in his short life had Harry ever seen anyone like Rosa Compton. Franny Shaddick was different, he admitted to himself and maybe their Belinda, too, might become something different to the village girls — though if she kept carrying on with young Charlie Ekert she'd end up like the rest, for sure. But Rosa he found fascinating.

Rosa was tall and slender, had long, lustrous black curling hair that bounced as she walked. Her face was an enthralling picture, her eyes sparkling blue, the cheekbones softly rounded, skin clear and fair. Perhaps it was her mouth that first attracted Harry's notice. He had never seen teeth so even, so purely white, nor lips so generously formed as were Rosa's. There was not about her appearance, he adjudged, even a hint of mean-ness in her nature, nor the slightest touch of the bodily muscularity to which, in women-folk, he was accustomed. Harry simply marvelled. He came to think of Rosa as one of a new race of people, a single specimen of a rare breed of creature which, until catching first sight of her, he believed existed only in the fanciful minds of creative artists who drew their pictures from their minds rather than from life around them. Rosa was the sort of girl such as Harry had seen depicted in a book, the one Belinda had brought home from the Shaddick's — the book Franny had thrown away because its spine was broken. Franny then had given it to Belinda to get it out of the house before her father found out how she had damaged it. Belinda had been quite reluctant to take the book, knowing that really Franny had no right to give it to her. The book belonged to Sir Richard Shaddick, yet Belinda could not resist bringing it home — even if they did have to keep it under a bed, out of sight, most of the time. Belinda said she would burn it, once she and Harry had pored over its beautiful illustrations and memorized them.

As he wondered if Belinda had carried out her professed intention, it was then that Rosa passed, carrying the plate laden with the supplies Grimbald had given her. He felt his heart flutter, his pulse quicken, his breathing stagger him, his own cheeks flush and betray his

thoughts, though his eyes refused to worship at this shrine of delight and would not rise to meet hers, insisting instead that he direct his gaze at the light entering from across the deck through the open port-window.

Rosa checked in her stride to acknowledge him, smiled and looked a little confused when her proposal to greet this strange young man was so obviously rejected. She tossed her head just enough to preserve her self-esteem, then resumed her passage to the far end of the below-deck where she and her aunt were accommodated.

In the grey dawn, the coast of Western Australia showed dimly before a low, distant range of hills lying some way from the shore — probably fifteen or twenty miles off, Harry guessed. A mantle of great satisfaction, a sense of achievement, a relieving thankfulness was available to any man who had successfully piloted his vessel thus far, as much as there was to the crew and passengers of any ship who had endured a voyage of nearly five months, had travelled half way around the world and who, at the end of it, remained healthy in mind and body.

Alone of the passengers on deck, Harry stood among crew members brought topside by the Mate, in readiness for Captain's orders to be relayed to them. The prospect of feeling the earth beneath his feet reminded him of home. His thoughts strayed to regard again the bonds of kinship and love that had sustained him. Images of his family — Ma, young Tommy; Belinda ... and Da, when he was alive — became a reinforcing strength to him before settling back again away from the forefront of his conscious regard. Before him was a new land, one in which he would find a place. This was where he would make a home. If he were to survive, he would have to build a new life for himself here. He would have to do this on his own — and alone. How he would go about the task Harry was not sure but, he reasoned, in the time it took the Dorian to reach South Australia perhaps, he might have sketched a plan of sorts. He had his 'establishment money' safely tucked away inside his shirt. At least he shouldn't starve while he looked for work.

William Sommers, ship's captain, watched his eleven-year old daughter emerge now from the cuddy amidships. He felt a tremor of concern for her. She was his only remaining family. He father loved his little Charlotte dearly. Yet, such an air of sadness imbued his regard of the child whenever, away from her immediate presence, her devoted father might be observed watching her. Charlotte had been sailing with him now for a year, since her

mother died, in fact. There had been no aunt, no grandparent or even a cousin no matter how far distant who had stepped forward to offer the girl solace, let alone a haven for her upbringing. Her father, William, was well aware that a berth on an old and grubby vessel such as he commanded was no possible place for a child and a girl, at that.

‘Charlotte, you should stay below,’ the Captain gently admonished the child. ‘It is far too cold for you to be on deck in your night things.’ Then more contemplatively he added ‘You’ll catch cold and then where would I be without my little lovebird?’ as wrapped the child in his greatcoat which he had stripped off himself at the girl’s approach.

William and the diminutive Charlotte stood together, watching the sun rise over the misty hills, seeing the first streaks of light speed towards them over the water, hearing the sounds of the awakening port of Fremantle reaching out to them borne by the stiff, morning land breeze against which the Dorian tacked towards an anchorage..

‘The pilot, now, Mr McGreedy, if you please,’ called Captain Sommers. ‘There’re more perils in these waters than I’d care to negotiate alone.’

‘Aye aye, Sir!’ Charlotte mimicked only seconds ahead of McGreedy who was by now accustomed to but not entirely accepting of that young lady’s antics. It was the sea-toughened McGreedy, however, who besides her father, had visited Charlotte in the Cape Town hospital.

‘Smell that air, Charlotte! Eucalyptus oil! Australia is full of its scent. Isn’t it wonderful!’ said the girl’s father as McGreedy saw to raising the flag whose appearance at the masthead would summon the pilot out of Rottnest Island.

The child simply snuggled into her father’s great coat and nestled beneath the comforting security of the man’s encircling arms. ‘Is this the end of our voyage?’ she asked, her voice muffled by the coat’s huge collar.

‘No,’ the rather gaunt-looking man replied. ‘This is Australia, true. But we are engaged to sail to Port Adelaide, which is in South Australia.’

‘Then why are we stopping here, Father?’

‘Stopping!?! Ships don’t ... ’ Captain Sommers snorted, immediately after relenting in deference to his audience. ‘Never mind. Some of the passengers — just a few, are leaving the ship at Fremantle, my dear. Miss Rosa Compton and her Aunt, for example.’

‘Oh! No! Not Rosa!’ Charlotte cried, bursting into tears.

‘It’s true, my dear. I’m sorry. I didn’t know that you were so fond of the young lady.’

‘Rosa is my really best friend, Daddy!’ the child lamented, genuine tears wetting her cheeks.

‘Well, I’m sure you’ll find another, dearest. Don’t cry.’

‘But I love her! Why didn’t she tell me she would be leaving the ship here?’ Charlotte wailed.

‘That you will have to ask the lady in question, my dear. But you can go ashore with her, if you want to. I have to disembark to see the shipping agents. We shall all go in together, then,’ the Captain consoled.

‘I was talking to that nice Harry Coates — yesterday, when I went down to see Mr Grimbal,’ Charlotte whispered, eyes bright, her previous distress in abeyance.

‘Grimbal? Why Grimbal, may I ask? Captain Sommers enquired with half attention. Some movement on the water between the ship and the approaching pilot boat had caught his interest.

‘Boiled sweeties,’ the girl replied, laconically, wiping nuisance tears from her cheeks on the sleeve of her nightdress.

‘Really ... ? Mr McGreedy, the glass, if you please!’ In the ensuing moments, Sommers freed himself of the child, and moved quickly to the elevated poop aft.

‘That’s far enough, Mr McGreedy. Hold us there, until the pilot is aboard, you understand?’

‘Aye aye, Sir,’ the Mate concurred, relaying the necessary instructions as the manoeuvre was effected. Once this was done, Captain Sommers and daughter retired and prepared themselves for breakfast, which as usual was taken in the Captain’s cabin where, at the change of watch, they were soon joined by First Mate Andrew McGreedy.

‘Ho! And how’s my little sweetheart this fine morning, then?’ the mate chortled, adopting his usual bluff approach with Charlotte as he took his seat at the table. ‘Saw you on deck at first light. And without your coat, again,’ he admonished jovially. ‘Be careful, my love. We don’t want you in hospital again like as Cape Town. There be savages here, I’m told. Eat small people who don’t look after themselves, isn’t that true, Cap’n?’

Sommers laughed. ‘Could well be, Mr McGreedy. Could well be.’

‘Is that bacon I am smelling, Miss Charlotte? My word, I do believe it is. Grimbal must have been hiding it! Are you going ashore straight, Cap’n Sommers sir?’

‘We most certainly are, Mr McGreedy. Isn’t that so. Daddy?’

‘Indeed. As you see, Mr McGreedy, I would have my orders even had I not already decided to go into the port.’

Charlotte seemed uncharacteristically pensive, McGreedy noticed. ‘And what is it, my lovely, that is keeping your chatterbox silent this morning? Was it my talk of the black savages that abound in those grey-green hills and on the plains that stretch for miles over much of this strange country? Come, sweet Charlotte. We’ve become accustomed to your bright chirruping over all these months. Don’t disappoint us now, isn’t that so, Captain?’

Captain Sommers, seated opposite McGreedy, looked up briefly from the tabletop that seemed to be preoccupying his thoughts. A faint smile supplanted the dead seriousness of his contemplation, just for a moment, before he returned his gaze to the board.

‘I see this grimness has struck the whole family this morning, Miss,’ the Mate teased the child. ‘Please release yourself, at least. Am I to spend the whole day in sombre mood, without my usual dose of happy Charlotte’s smile? I thought I was your friend.’

‘Oh! Of course you are my friend, Mr McGreedy. But you see my other dear friend, Rosa, is going ashore today with her aunt, Mrs Capstock. They are going to live in this horrible place. And if there really are savages, Rosa might be taken and Heaven knows what they might do to her!’

‘Be quiet, Charlotte!’ Captain Sommers intervened, returning abruptly to the present. ‘Mr McGreedy was joking. You should know him by now. Please desist at once, sir,’ he instructed his first officer testily.

‘Charlotte dear,’ McGreedy began, by way of conciliation, ‘it was never my intention to frighten you — you, of all people. Let me explain ...’

Before the Mate could say more immediately, Captain Sommers rose from the table and advised that he would be on deck, awaiting the pilot and as he went intimated to McGreedy that he should not to delay his own return to his station over-long.

‘What, Mr McGreedy? What were you going to tell me,’ Charlotte pressed urgently.

Torn between the persuasion of a call to duty and the pleading tones of the little girl proved to McGreedy something of dilemma. In the end he chose to follow the dictates of his heart and, reaching across the table to take the child’s small hands in his own rough fingers, he began a history as he knew it of this fledgling colony of the British people.

‘It was more than forty years ago that a Captain Stirling of the British navy was sailed up the Swan river by his crew. He’d been sent out here to investigate things and to find a suitable spot for a settlement — which the people with the money on the eastern side of the

country thought they'd better do something about before anybody else did. They had no ideas about the west except that it was a huge empty space on the map.'

'But what about the savages, Mr McGreedy?' Charlotte interrupted. 'You said that there were savages. Did they come in the same ships when the settlement was started? So they're not black, really...'

'They are black, all right ... and they have been in this country a long, long time,' McGreedy assured Charlotte. 'They are different. And because they hadn't built any cities or farms we could see or churches or gardens or written any books and didn't wear clothes so we could see who was important and who wasn't or have a flag stuck up on a stick which everybody clustered around and "hoorah"-ed at, we reckoned we were entitled to take over the land and call it ours.'

'But do they really eat other people, Mr McGreedy?' Charlotte begged to know. She was thinking of Rosa and Mrs Capstock.

'Stories, my love. Just stories,' McGreedy soothed.

'Daddy reads stories to me, sometimes ... but they won't eat Rosa, will they?'

'I doubt your Rosa will ever be in any danger of that, my dear. Don't worry ... but I must get on deck. The pilot must be nigh by now.'

As McGreedy stood in readiness to go, Charlotte also pushed back her chair, stood, then ran around the table to the First Officer's side, lifting her chin to receive his customary kiss.

'Goodbye, dear Charlotte. Goodbye.' McGreedy said, his tarry sailor's hands tenderly resting gently for a moment upon her small shoulders.

Harry Coates remained with his thoughts alone at the rail. No berth was yet available for the Dorian, word being sent by the ship's agents for it to stand off in the roads, this news being conveyed to the ship by the black-bearded pilot who appeared over the ship's leeward railing looking for all the world like a pirate, a long-barrelled pistol at his belt and a black patch over his left eye. Charlotte Sommers, Harry happened to notice, was agog at the sight of him and stayed well clear, carefully keeping to the opposite side of the deck with most of the passengers who by this time were taking the air, all of them scanning the shore, some with spy-glasses examining the port and town enthusiastically, for this was the first land to come in view for nearly a month since leaving the Cape of Good Hope.

The mists of morning soon cleared away from the land, leaving the view to become a glaring brilliance of long sandy beaches and low, limestone cliffs, the shore-line dotted

with miserable shacks; the occasional building of more permanence white-washed and deserving of a township more substantial than the present one appeared to be. Bush fires burned inland, smoke in places obscuring the hills in the far distance which stood, as one passenger put it, without any remarkable contrast to the view the seafarers had become accustomed to on the long haul from Africa. His interest taken by the sight of this new land and sounds of the awakening port that echoed intermittently across the water as the morning breeze eddied the intervening air, Harry was unaware of the still small figure standing beside him at the ship's rail. Had he reached out at that moment as the gulls of morning began to wheel and screech about the ship, he might have encountered a soul as apprehensive and as much in need of comfort as himself. Harry Coates, though, could not then have been conscious of love's imperatives as these affected the child. Little Charlotte Sommers nursed a presently secret longing within her that would be years in maturing.

Forbes and McCarthy, Shipping Agents, kept offices in a street running parallel to the High Street, between it and the water's edge. The door of the building boasted polished brass handles and glazed panelling and was set in a stone facade also containing tall windows within imported joinery. Indeed an impressive sight, nevertheless its incongruity among the derelict shacks and shanties that comprised the majority of the structures lining Fremantle's white limestone streets made Rosa Compton laugh merrily to such a degree that her aunt, Gemima Capstock, tongue in cheek, was compelled to wait upon the return of sobriety to her niece's countenance before surmounting the first of several polished granite steps leading up to this splendid frontage.

More panelling greeted the incomer to the ground floor offices; but the interior was largely free of partitioning. A long counter spread across the room at perhaps half the distance to the interior side of the two windows already noted, and behind this counter toiled clerks at ledgers which stood on sloped desks.

A superior-looking balding gentleman sat at a lower but obviously resplendent desk with his back to the light and it was to him others deferred as the business of the day proceeded. A staircase ascended the left-hand wall to an upper floor where, no doubt, if this colonial version of a merchant's headquarters conformed to its European genesis, private offices for the principals of the business would be discovered. Stools, for the convenience of customers, ranged along the public side of the counter, and a gold-lettered sign on a block of brilliantly polished, dark wood announcing "Enquiries" was to be seen

immediately upon entering. It was towards this designated area of the chamber that Mrs Capstock now pursued her way.

Rosa remained by the door. For a minute or two the young woman was a keen observer of the interchange between her aunt and the clerk who attended her and so she was engaged when suddenly she heard her name being called in a shrill, excited way, from somewhere ... to the left, up ... ? Hardly had the Rosa time to identify the source of the sounds than Charlotte Sommers raced to the bottom of the stairs, danced across the business chamber and desperately flung herself into her arms.

‘Rosa! Lovely Rosa!’ the younger girl cried happily, ‘I’m so glad you’ve come! Father’s been upstairs talking for hours! Can I come with you? Where are you staying? Is there room for us?’

‘Charlotte, sweetheart!’ Rosa wrapped her arm about the child, quite joyfully. ‘You know ... we haven’t seen each other since this morning ... ’ she began laughingly.

‘Oh! I know! I know!’ the other agreed, almost tragically. ‘I’ve missed you so much! I do wish we could be together forever.’

‘Where is Captain Sommers, Charlotte?’ Rosa asked the girl.

‘Upstairs, I said,’ Charlotte replied petulantly, ‘and he’s left me alone for hours.’

‘Dear me. Fathers have to do this sometimes, my love.’

‘Let me stay with you, Rosa?’ came the pleading response. ‘I know Father has to attend to business but it’s so boring! Can’t I go with ... ’

‘Your father, Miss. Come along. Let Miss Compton have some peace, child.’ Unnoticed by either of them, Captain Sommers had somehow entered their conference.

‘But couldn’t I go with Rosa — I mean Miss Compton tonight, Daddy ... please?’

‘Neither Miss Compton nor her aunt, good Mrs Capstock, wish to be encumbered with further responsibilities at this time, Charlotte. Come.’

‘I wouldn’t be any trouble, Rosa, truly. And we could sleep together. I wouldn’t take up much room.’ Round-eyed, so serious, little Charlotte could not be denied; yet Rosa found that it fell to her to disappoint her devotee. Her Aunt Gemima was in charge. There was nothing Rosa could do. Captain Sommers stood by, silent. It was as though he, too, would be well pleased if tonight he might be free of his beloved Charlotte. Rosa sensed that there was something troubling him, making him hope for some alleviation of a pressure upon him which presently precluded him from dedicating his actions to the whims of his child quite as freely as he might wish.

This contretemps might have gone on to some hugely melodramatic denouement had not Mrs Capstock at this point joined her niece with the news that all had been attended to; that a boat would be sent out to the Dorian first thing in the morning to collect the ladies' baggage and trunks. Being a gentlewoman of some experience in matters of family, especially of its younger members, only a minute elapsed before she took in the situation she had just become party to, had considered its implications and was putting forward her solution to it. 'Captain Sommers, I take it you are staying at the port overnight?' Mrs Capstock enquired, as a preliminary.

'Well, yes ... that is, I hope to. I have business ashore still to attend to in the morning ...' the sailor replied, smelling the wind, as it were. Throughout the long hours and days of this journey to Australia, and whenever the running of his ship so allowed him the occasion, Sommers had pondered perplexedly over his — and Charlotte's — future course. This trip out to the southern colonies was his third, with the vessel under his command each time loaded with hopeful migrants, nearly every one seeking a new start, new opportunities, new lives. Until now, the idea that he himself might ever join this flood of European migrants had never entered his mind. But when his wife died and he became solely responsible for the care and protection of his daughter, he soon came to realise that a life at sea for her — and for himself — would become impossible. Travellers in the past had spoken to him of the opportunities Australia had to offer the settler, of how land could be obtained so cheaply and easily and how a man well-positioned financially — as he was, presently — could live the life of a rural squire, at ease on his two or three thousand abundantly-yielding acres. Sommers had listened to such tales so often as to believe that, even discounting by fifty percent the boasted-of benefits that might accrue to a man bold enough "risk his arm" in this gigantic, hardly settled vacant land, here was an opportunity going begging. Tomorrow, so he had resolved only last night, he would go ashore and begin his own investigation as to this land's potential to yield for him what he held to be his imperative need: a home and income for himself and Charlotte. On the grounds of his early life experiences being associated with farming — among the wide fields of Wiltshire — it was in agriculture that Captain Sommers saw his landed future; and the more he had thought about it, the more urgent he perceived this need to be.

'Then I believe it would be easier for you if you were to make your arrangements — er — alone?'

The good Captain was too slow to agree.

‘Then,’ continued Mrs Capstock, ‘if we — that is, Rosa my niece and I could be of assistance we would be only too pleased ... as a mark of appreciation for our safe landing at our destination.’

‘You are too kind ... ’

‘Nonsense, Captain Sommers: we’d be very pleased to take Charlotte with us for the night. I’m sure my dear friend Mrs Watson won’t mind and, besides, as Charlotte says, she and Rosa could sleep together if there is indeed a shortage of sleeping space.’

‘Aunt Gemima! I didn’t know you overheard ...’ exclaimed Charlotte.

‘Charlotte! Your manners. How dare you be so bold with Mrs Capstock!’ the girl’s father intervened.

‘I am honoured, Captain Sommers. The child meant no disrespect, I’m sure,’ returned Mrs Capstock in her warmest tones.

‘Then if you are sure that Charlotte is not an imposition, Ma’am ... ’

‘Of course, she’ll be most welcome. Come here Charlotte, dear.’

Charlotte surrendered Rosa’s hand which she had securely grasped throughout the preceding interchange and went to Mrs Capstock’s side at once.

‘Very well, Charlotte. You are a very lucky girl. Be good, little sweetheart,’ murmured the Captain, returning his daughter’s embrace. ‘Would ten o’clock, here, in the morning be convenient, Mrs Capstock?’

‘Aye aye, Cap’n’ the child supplied before her guardian could speak. ‘Ten o’clock she be. Look sharp there, Father.’

‘Until tomorrow then, ladies ... and thank you both,’ Sommers bid. At the door, the man turned, looked back at his daughter longingly, and then, as though forming a lasting image of the group for another moment, he passed from view. Rosa felt suddenly chilled and apprehensive but shrugged off the sensation as Charlotte joined hands with her to lead her two “captives” from the building, eager to begin this latest adventure of her short life.

CHAPTER Three

On the summit of Cornwall's Kit Hill near Hingston Down on the Tamar River there remains a chimney stack marking the one-time existence there of a tin mine. And from this site, then an active working which Harry visited on his way to Plymouth, there is a rare view of the Cornish countryside. It was that homeland of which the lad was again thinking as he took in the sight before him from this Swan River's cliff-faced western bank. Harry was driven to tears — for his home, his mates; still again for his Ma and Belinda and Tommy and because of the momentary sensation of overwhelming loneliness the vast spaces he faced inspired in him. Until now, until he realized that he had in a sense arrived in Australia and had reached a destination of which this scene before him was a representation, the looming world had imposed upon him little of its reality. In the cabin-ed seclusion of the ship which had brought him here, there was little difference to the life to which he had been accustomed except for the smell; for the clothes, the speech and actions of his fellow passengers and the ship's crew. Under sail, below decks the vessel was full of darkness and noises as if it were a mine and its human population a core of underground workers within it.

Landing at the port of Fremantle had its equivalent in Harry's experience. He likened it to the first sight of morning light after a shift spent mostly on his knees scratching out the ore from a seam so deep that he, like his mates would work in the pitch dark rather than have a candle rob the scarce air of its negligible goodness. It was the boundlessness of the fresh air here which was oppressing him, Harry decided ruefully, and smiled at himself. How fortunate could a man be to be able to breathe in air uncluttered by wet dust and the foul mouldy atmospheres of those man-made underground horror-chambers to which he had grown accustomed. No wonder Cornish miners who worked underground rarely made their lives stretch to forty years.

Happy again at the thought of his escape from certain early disease and death, Harry was prepared to re-assess the scene he was able to now overlook ...

It was an emerging patchwork of a loosely scattered, sleepy looking settlement that the young man gazed out upon. Where the river broadened and spread itself over reedy mudflats, among dull grey-greenish scrub and trees clusters of houses, warehouses, shops and other commercial premises merged into rough order on the lowlands surrounding the water. The town meandered eastwards, towards the line of low, sullen looking hills

delimiting the extent of a flat, coastal plain prevailing without interruption north and south as far as the young man could see.

Harry had reached the prominence upon which he now stood by scrambling up the face of the sharply-sloped escarpment rising above the river. It was along that sprawling river bank he had rambled that morning of his first visit to Perth. A rough track for horse-drawn traffic had been constructed to allow passage to and from the port and it was along this that the young man had enthusiastically set off to explore the river's course. Yesterday, he had taken the journey from Fremantle by water, despite his weariness with boats of any kind.

Looking down now at the settlement, Harry made out the Town Hall, a fine, steepled building in the English style, and the military barracks to the west of it, beneath him at the extremity of the a wide thoroughfare running east to west through the town. There were only a few structures of present significance within the main part of what was, Harry was told at his lodgings, intended to become a major city if certain men had their way. Apart from Cape Town, Harry had never been in a city — unless Plymouth was such a thing. Nothing about that place had impressed him, although he did remember seeing some fine houses there. Well out of the reach of folk such as himself, they might as well have been fairy palaces inhabited by over-grown piskies, as to have had any relevance to the likes of him or his Ma. Belinda, now, was another matter, she being used to living with the Shaddicks up at Warren Hall. Young Tom could have grown up to be comfortable in rich people's surroundings, Harry thought, if the poor little beggar hadn't had to go into the mines when Da fell off the ladder. Tom had the brain to be a better'n.

' 'stead a' that, now h' were in with the likes a' thet little skerrick Wynn Treloar. God knows where thet'd lead 'im. Dougie, now: 'e an' Tom — well, maybe.'

Harry couldn't help smiling at the thought. It amused him too to realize that all his good intentions brewed carefully and quietly aboard ship had come to so little when a true depth was to be touched. Inspired by Rosa Compton's presence more than anyone, Harry had been trying at least to think in "proper" language and to do his best to disguise the give-away West Country twang which, to his ears at least, sounded "soft" outside his own County. Over the months of the voyage, he had managed to speak more like Rosa, like Franny Shaddick, like the repulsive Jonathon Butler, Shaddick's steward, whose power Harry secretly admired, even though he hated the man with a native fervour.

Being beholden to an owner — in Harry's case, Richard Shaddick — was contrary to the times, anathaemic in these days of rising worker-confederations. The importance of the

individual was beginning to loom fearfully for traditionalist owners, employers and investors alike. For the first time at least in the history of organized industrialization the essential unit of output, the worker, was beginning to demand recognition of his role and to understand the implications of his part within this system of resource exploitation. Harry understood all this. He knew that people like his Da, he himself, his Ma, Tommy, even Belinda in her work up at the big house, had depended on the existence of the black grains of tin won so laboriously in the mine. He could see that it was hardly fair that one man should own this resource; yet he understood, too, that without the money, expertise and enthusiasm of men like Shaddick, no deep mining would ever be a success. Both sides — miners and owners — deserved a fair return on their inputs. Harry also knew that he who controlled the actual money once the joint product had been turned into currency, controlled the world, governed lives and virtually determined who should live and how they went about it, be they Church or Chapel or Callithumpian.

While waiting in Plymouth for the Dorian to take on its crew, its supplies and freight; before lastly taking aboard its one hundred and thirty passengers, everyone heard of the continuing “bust” of prices. Men who had brushed aside the downward turn in tin now faced the grim fact that the slide was on and gaining in momentum. Soon, the bogey of the home industry was revealed. Queensland tin from Australia was flooding the market, being freighted “home” cheaply as ballast in wool-clippers now racing into European ports so numerous, carrying that light-weight, awkwardly-stowed cargo safely and so profitably. Smelters in Cornwall were quick to buy up this imported tin over the local product. Local demand for black tin kept falling. Mine closures followed, one after another, the marginal ones first, then finally the greatest, and oldest, of all. Unemployment — and its attendant starvation — followed. Harry knew himself to be no fore-runner in the migration stakes. Cornish miners and their families in their hundreds and then their thousands had begun a migration such as the country had never before experienced — to America, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia.

The tang of the West Australian bush, however — the same as famously blew out to sea to meet and welcome the sail-wearied traveller approaching land — overpowered any regrets Harry Coates might have entertained at this minute. Below on the water puffed one of the few river steam-driven boats of the colony. Beyond it, on a narrow neck of land jutting out from the southern bank of Perth Water, the ruin of a windmill once used to grind the town’s daily flour remained, its sails no longer filled with a pleasant breeze perfumed

with the warm breath of the bush. Over-borne by the height of Mount Eliza, nestled tight between the cliff-face and the water's edge, quaintly bottle-necking riverside access to the west of the town stood one of several mills, from which enterprise smoke from its boilers, mingling with the sickly-sweet aroma of malting grain from a nearby brewery arose to insistently imbue the scent of the surrounding eucalypts with some quite extraordinary compounds.

Harry felt the somnolence of the scene, the falling sunlight of the afternoon and the warmth to which he was not really accustomed begin its work. Driven by the imperatives of such a pleasant environment, the young man sought out a shaded spot and lay down on a bed of fallen leaves and other woodland debris, where he drifted into sleep almost at once — and barely rested, was wakened in a trice by the shrill whistle of the steam-boat approaching the landing below.

The lad sprang to his feet and almost in the same action was sprinting towards the steep, winding track that would lead him back down the hillside, fearful that he might miss passage to Fremantle and instead have to spend another night in the town. With a vision still in his dream-filled head of Rosa Compton beckoning him to her, Harry sped along the foreshore, happily reaching the rough wooden jetty only moments before cast-off.

A few uneventful hours later and ready to eat whatever he could find first, ashore, Harry waited impatiently for the steamer to pull alongside the low Fremantle jetty not far from the bar of rock at the river mouth which denied all but shallow-draught barges access to the port proper and the sea.

Obtaining a dinner of sorts at the inn not far from the quay Harry, his immediate hunger satisfied, was soon drinking a beer from the very brewery he had seen that afternoon while wishing for a mate to whom he might relate his impressions of the day. Sharing his experiences, trialling the validity of his thoughts with another, was uppermost in his mind. The hessian-lined shanty, lit only by two rather inadequate, struggling oil lamps, to him had become a dark, un-welcoming hole filled with stale tobacco smoke. None, of his age, at least, seemed to exist among the grouped, rather morose clientele at the bar.

Each person there stared at the ranked bottles on shelves behind the rough counter of adze-dressed planks and kept himself to himself. The serious business of drinking was in progress. Perhaps when the liquid they drank took its effect, the customers might become

more convivial. But presently, Harry found, silence was the commodity next most valued after the booze.

Exasperated, he decided at length to walk to the port where, somewhere in the distance he could hear the sound of roistering, of music and indications of the sort of company he was seeking.

The young, unsophisticated miner was some twelve thousand miles from home. Already in his young life he had been forced to contemplate the loneliness of death, trapped some eighty fathoms underground. Then this slender figure of a man had left his loved ones, his homeland, and for a hundred and forty one days had confined himself to the cramped quarters of a makeshift migrant ship to land himself in this strange, rather profitless place where now, on a warm summer evening he was making his way, anticipating nothing but pleasure, happily liking his thoughts, which for once were quite free of the blackening memories that habitually and recently had occluded his enjoyment of life.

* * * * *

As Harry Coates awaits the dealing of his next card ... in Exeter, Devon, there was a cab driver who drove his horse-drawn carriage early and late, pausing only on Sundays to attend his house, his home, a loving wife and several youngsters, and to grease his hansom's wheels. He was good, unintelligent, happy, industrious, and so died quite young — of pneumonia, through driving about in the English rain. A sword thrust through the gut certainly would have read better had that intelligence been communicated in terms befitting the horror of the event. My great grandfather, maternal, as it happened, was not a personage of note, a younger son or even a vicar, so died commonly of a common ailment.

In her father's mansion there were many mouths, insufficient beds and an acute shortage of room. Alma, the cab-driver's youngest daughter and subsequently my grandmother, maternal, took up seamstressing and on reaching maturity, expressed her intention to emigrate to Australia. So, taking from her grandmother a favourite cup; from her mother a small, yellow vase in the shape of a boot and from her employer his apprentice for husband, she and these garnerings and gatherings set sail for those shores we now know as fatal. Alma took Jack away from his foster-parents, Exeter and England just as he was forming a rather nice and meaningful relationship with Rebecca. One-time friend of both, Rebecca never forgave Alma, though the family believes that she, Rebecca, was to comfort Jack more than once, hence, in his mortal history.

History's page is blank as to why a seamstress and her tailor should have selected Western Australia as a destination. They could have gone to Canada presumably, or America — north or south, New Zealand, Sydney ... or the tropics. For better or worse, however, they chose Fremantle, and there they landed without fanfare, vice-regal notice or much in the way of pennies.

* * * * *

Just five minutes later, after departing from the inn near the river landing and walking perhaps for two minutes earlier, Harry regained consciousness. Who or what hit him, he would never know. His head ached terribly, and with the admission of this reality came another which told him he was lying on the ground and that the surroundings in which he found himself were hideously dark. And that somewhere there was a creaking sound almost as terrible as that which haunted his nights yet and made him cry out in the awful stillnesses he was forever enduring.

He leapt to his feet and froze. There it was! Creak, creak! Wildly he cried out, terrified. There it was again, slower this time. And again, slower still.

Suddenly, he knew. He cursed. He laughed. It was the wind, a gentle thing, with barely the strength to swing the wooden board above his head on which, Harry could just make out, were the words: "Fox" and "Grain".

It was then that he found the street on which he stood was not entirely unlit. A small glimmer of light fell onto the roadway from a window above the sign.

Feeling that any company at this time was better than none and anxious to examine himself more closely than he was able to in the street, Harry searched along the frontage of the grain merchant's premises until he found what he was looking for. Heedless of what consequences might follow on this, he knocked heavily upon the hardwood private access door he had discovered close by and below the light he had already noted.

After what seemed an age, a waist-coated figure of a man with long, straight receding hair was revealed, holding a lantern aloft, the better to examine his caller.

'Yes, what do you want?' the man asked, peremptorily.

'I'm sorry to bother you, sir ...' Harry began.

'Then why have you? Come on! Out with it,' came the gruff response.

'Oi've been bloody robbed, oi 'ave an' I wanna hev a look at meself,' Harry blurted out, quite oblivious to the reversion.

‘That’s more bloody like it, feller,’ replied the merchant. ‘Why didn’t you say so in the first place? Get inside and let’s have a look at you. Why in hell’s name you’d be wandering about in this neck of the woods, I’d like to know. Off the boat today?’

‘Day afore yesterday,’ Harry responded, no less belligerently than his interrogator.

‘C’mon, get inside,’ was the merchant’s response, closing the door behind Harry then squeezing past him to lead the way up a short flight of rather rickety stairs to something like a mezzanine floor where his living rooms began.

‘Sit yerself down there,’ commanded the merchant who, Harry noted, was a middle-aged, paunchy figure possessed of wiry red hair, clean-shaven and dressed in rough canvas trousers, flannel shirt and rather shabby waistcoat. The man’s feet were thrust into a pair of drab down-at-heel slippers which looked as though they were home-made from jute sacking.

‘Now let’s have a look at you, m’lad. Fox is my name, by the way: Cecil Fox. People with no manners — probably the only sort ‘round here — call me ‘Foxy’. Do the same, mate. Don’t try to be different,’ he said, holding the lantern on high with one hand while he ran his fingers over Harry’s head, measuring the extent of the lump arising there. Fox whistled through teeth that showed yellow in the weak light. ‘Fair walloped you, eh?’ he said in response to Harry’s involuntary shrinking from his touch. ‘Bit of blood; needs a wipe. But otherwise, not too bad,’ Fox reported, cheerily.

Harry couldn’t altogether agree, but felt a little less hurt on hearing the stranger’s words.

‘What we’ve got to ask now is why did the bastard hit you?’ mused the man. ‘Anything missing from your pockets? Fob, maybe, for instance? What’s yer name?’

Harry checked. ‘Watch is gone,’ he reported with regret, then ‘Harry Coates’ he said. The plated fob and its chain which he had worn so proudly in memory of his Da and his only possession of any worth, given to him by his mother as a keepsake to remind him of his father, was lost.

‘Nothing else?’ the merchant insisted, sceptically.

‘Oh, Christ! Me money!’ Harry gasped, springing to his feet, reaching inside his shirt as he did so where he had secured his wallet with a strap around his chest, ‘The sod’s pinched me money! Above twelve pounds! Gone!’ he cried. ‘All me establishment money, gone!’

‘I thought it was unlikely anyone would knock you down for just a tin-plated fob watch in this little town, m’lad,’ Fox sniffed rather complacently. ‘The watch was tin-plated, I

suppose?’ he checked and nodded wisely when his supposition was confirmed. ‘Then you’ve been rolled, my boy, in the classic way. New chum, no brain enough to keep to the river road. Night-time. Dark alley. Whoompf!’

Harry stared blankly; comprehended; said ‘Thanks’ and rose again from his seat, to which he had sunk in disbelief as the understanding of his predicament overwhelmed him. He wanted to leave this place; but as to where he should go, what he should do, he had no ideas.

‘So now you want to piss off, get to hell out of here ... jump in the river, why don’t you? Two or three a week they fish out of the harbour, drowned for one reason or another — money, women — or lack of them more like ... loneliness. Sometimes they go in voluntarily; other times they maybe be pushed. The West’s a terribly isolated place ... being generally two thousand miles from anywhere.’

‘No! I won’t!’ Harry declared instinctively.

The older man was silent, eyes staring vacantly at the lantern flame for a long minute before he spoke again: ‘Tell you what, laddie. Go downstairs. Look in the far corner. There’s a rack full of straw. Bunk down there for the night. Old Ned snores — and farts something terrible — but no harm will come to you. Just one thing. No smoking or you’ll literally burn up a gift horse!’ Cecil Fox instructed, accompanying his last words with a full, belly laugh. ‘Ned was given to me by a one-time wood merchant who had saved enough here to push on to better forests or something over East,’ Fox offered by way of explanation. ‘Here, take the lantern — but do mind the straw. I’ll get you a cuppa tea — Mother Murphy’s cure all — first.’

Harry was truly stunned. Everything had moved, was moving too quickly for his presently-impaired consciousness. What he was to do seemed ... was ... a question imperatively asking for settlement. But he couldn’t think. His brain was porridged.

‘Come on, lad. I know how you must feel. I’m sorry. But in another minute, I’m sure, Mrs Fox will be out of bed then all hell will break loose. She hates a disturbed night. So come with me. I’ll show you where you can sleep. We’ll talk about things in the morning.’

Without waiting for Harry’s reply, Fox took up the lantern himself and began to descend the stairs to the room below. ‘Come on, son!’ he commanded, turning on the second or third tread. ‘Come!’

‘Right, this is the spot,’ Fox said, once the two men had crossed the stone-flagged floor to the corner where fodder for old Ned was stored. ‘Bunk down there. Pull the straw over yourself if you get cold. One of the girls’ll wake you if you sleep in. ‘Night. I’ll take the lantern.’

Harry lay in the straw in the dark, but had no tears to weep. He was cold, shivering. Shock effects overtook him. He burrowed deep into the straw and, eventually, slept.

Andrew McGreedy shielded his eyes to examine the northern horizon. Summer was nearing its end. Late, ferocious storms often marked the end of the hot season in these waters, though only rarely did the cyclonic winds experienced along the far northern coasts descend to this latitude. The air was still and hot. A brooding atmosphere, he would call it. There was something ominous about it. The sea was too flat in the roads outside the port. But for the reefs, he would move the Dorian closer to the island where shelter might be taken if the murderous winds of which he had heard should arise. Meanwhile, all he could do was await the return of Captain Sommers, now that the ship was ready to sail, and appease his ship’s passengers as best he could until that time arrived.

Captain Sommers had gone ashore two days ago and since then no word of him had been received. Charlotte, the Captain’s daughter was not aboard, either, though it was reported by the agent that she was last seen in the company of Mrs Capstock and her niece — the latter the beloved Rosa Compton, McGreedy recalled.

The mate longed to go ashore himself and make enquiries of his own in respect of his Captain’s apparent disappearance. The man’s present behaviour was inconsistent with his demeanour on the voyage so far. McGreedy could not dispel the thought assailing his mind that something had happened to Sommers. He must appear tomorrow. Already the more vociferous of the passengers bound for Port Adelaide were demanding of the agent that McGreedy be allowed to assume command of the vessel and weigh anchor, if Sommers did not return to his ship.

Loyalty to his Captain and the urgency he felt necessary to make sail ahead of the change in the weather his sea-faring instincts warned him was imminent created a predicament for McGreedy. In the upshot, the ship’s mate decided to risk putting ashore himself.

His first call he made to the agent, a taciturn fellow McGreedy could not take to; yet with that personage’s blessing McGreedy began his search of the docks, undertaking to

report back to the agent by late afternoon if not before, when, if Sommers had not been found, the Dorian with McGreedy in command, would sail at first light in the morning, providing sea conditions were right.

By mid-afternoon, McGreedy and the two volunteers from among the crew of the Dorian whose absence from the ship the agent knew nothing about, met as pre-arranged at the Billabong Tavern in the High Street. Sommers, all three were certain, was not in Fremantle, alive. Not a word could be advanced as to what had happened to the man, or of where he had been. It was as though he had vanished without trace. No-one to whom any of the three had spoken had seen him, heard of him, knew anything at all about the person described to them. Mysteriously, their Captain had disappeared into thin air. McGreedy had tracked down Mrs Capstock and Miss Compton who pro temps were acting as guardians of the Captain's daughter; but none of that trio could tell him more than he already knew — that their last sighting of Captain Sommers had been at the shipping agent's, nearly three days ago.

McGreedy had left young Charlotte in tears and this troubled him deeply for he was truly devoted to the child. He felt consoled, however, that Charlotte was in the best alternative care she could wish for.

Neither of the sailors who had assisted McGreedy in the search of the town had the slightest news to contribute. All had drawn a blank. For most intents and purposes their Captain was lost. This fact reported to the agent later in the day caused less concern than McGreedy thought proper. That a memorandum of agreement citing himself as now being in command of the Dorian was already prepared, awaiting only his signature, seemed to suggest to McGreedy collusion on the part of the agent and his former captain; yet, with the second, Mr Anderson, made up to first mate, the newly-appointed commander of the Dorian had himself conveyed out into the roads and returned to his ship, the crew members who had earlier assisted him skillfully tacking their little boat to the sea breeze blowing stiffly landwards against their direction of passage.

Within minutes the news of the decision to have McGreedy take over the ship had spread. Delighted passengers made their goods ready to go to sea again and the crew prepared the vessel for sailing as soon as sufficient morning light might permit her safe departure from the anchorage.

Andrew McGreedy spent the last moments before the evening dimmed into night, staring shoreward in sombre mood, willing a boat to appear though seeing nothing but the roll of the swell as the deck beneath him rose and fell in the troughing waves.

Anchors up first thing in the morning, her previously bare poles sporting enough canvas now to carry her sedately into the open sea, the Dorian soon fully fledged was seen to be scudding along, making for the Leeuwin, South Australia-bound, disconsolately watched by a long-faced young man in a muddied coat, standing on the beach in front of the fort-like Arthur's Head, unsure of his next meal, let alone his future beyond the end of the week.

'You're back, then?' Cecil Fox remarked without the least spark of surprise. 'Missed your boat, now you've lost all your possessions, if you had any, the arse is out of your trousers and you are hungry.'

Harry could only nod his agreement to this catalogue of woe.

'So you want me to feed you, house you and pay you a pittance in return for your minuscule contribution to the welfare of my business: correct?'

'I didn't come here to ask for your charity, Mr Fox. I came to ask your advice, if you'd be kind enough,' Harry began hotly.

'And I've just given you it. You're not the first. You won't be the last young feller to come a cropper on his first night out on the town. And I happen to need a hand. Come and meet the wife. I suppose I was right when I said your ship's made off with all you own in the world?'

Harry nodded.

'Then count your lucky stars there are fools like me left in the world. And come on! Stop looking so bloody miserable and follow me upstairs.'

'What?' was Mrs Fox's response to her husband introducing her to Harry. 'You've picked up another stray, have you Cecil? At least this one seems to have the full use of his arms and legs, which makes a change. And I suppose you are going to pay him for taking the food out of our mouths as usual?'

'Ah, Agnes,' Mr Fox admonished in a soft voice, looking at this woman with such a sweet, kindly expression on his beaming face. 'I would do the same for you, my love, and more.'

'Humph!,' snorted the lady, 'You wouldn't find me on the streets.'

‘I’m pleased to hear it, Agnes dear,’ Mr Fox replied, so well concealing his merriment that Harry mistook him completely and had to choke off the smile for which he had prepared his features.

‘And where do you propose this ... person should house himself, may I ask, Mr Fox?’ that man’s wife demanded.

Fox looked at Harry. ‘He’s a strong looking lad. The woodshed, Agnes?’

‘So you might well say, Mr Fox. Another log will barely fill it, you keep me so ill-supplied. He could be put to work rendering the knotty pieces that will not fit the hearth.’

‘So he could, my dear, so he could. But no. Such a young man as he should be offered the spare bed in the loft, above Margaret’s room ... ’ Fox was proposing when his wife, flying into a rage interrupted the expression of his thoughts on the subject of Harry’s accommodation.

‘So you want to give him my daughter as well!?’ she screamed, her face turning red as she clenched her fist and shook it at Harry, as though to reinforce her words.

‘Agnes, my darling, tell me. When did I give anything away? You should know, after all these years, I never give anything away. I lend, sometimes, and always I receive back, and often with interest though I charge none. Anything I give to this young man will be a loan, mark my words. He’s the sort of person who repays twice over, good or bad. I shall, of course, be sure to give him only good. Never therefore shall I give him Margaret. One of the dear child is quite enough. Two would be insupportable.’

Mrs Fox had listened to her husband; but waited her turn. That now arrived. While gripping the edge of the table with both hands, she leaned towards him, the tendons of her neck standing out like guy ropes in a gale. Forcing her words from between clenched teeth, the lady muttered: ‘Fox, understand this. One of these days you will tip me over the edge and I will not be responsible for my actions!’

‘Don’t worry, my darling: I shall forgive you.’ her mate responded with equanimity, taking his pipe from his coat, turning it towards the light penetrating the room from a curtained window in the wall behind him and examining the state of its bowl.

These actions of his effected an immediate response from Mrs Fox who instantly changed her focus and began: ‘Cecil Fox, don’t you dare light that monstrous thing in my kitchen!’

‘Never, my love,’ Fox advised; then to Harry: ‘Shall we see you settled, young feller?’

Nonplussed, the young man also rose from the table and followed his self-elected employer out of the kitchen-cum-dining room and into something like a hallway from which another stair led them to an upper chamber bare of more than a bed, a packing-case chest and a chair Harry would never dare to trust his weight upon. A narrow window overlooked the merchant's yard below.

'It's yours if you want it, young feller. Make up your mind, then come and see me down below in the yard in about ten minutes. I can't be more precise — you've lost your watch, heh?' Fox concluded with a laugh as he left the room.

Harry listened to the sound of Fox's receding footsteps, a door opening and closing and the muted tones of talking somewhere in what he guessed to be a part of the house with which he was not familiar.

Harry was to help load and deliver fodder about the town, be provisioner to stables both private and public, deliverer of coal to those who could afford it and a cutter of chaff by means of an evil-looking machine with razor-sharp blades that stood next to the stored hay kept in the merchant's barn-like premises.

'That's about it,' Cecil Fox was saying, having shown Harry the extent of the business and explained the various tasks he would be required to perform. 'It's no life forever, but it will tide you over. I could possibly manage a pound a week and keep, lodgings thrown in. The keep you'll get I can't guarantee. The quality of it depends on a number of things you'll become acquainted with soon enough; but if worst comes, there's always a bone to gnaw at the Banksia or pea soup with or without weevils swimming about in it, depending on the season.'

Harry smiled. He was used to hard work, and this proposition before him would certainly need muscle. The long sea voyage had softened him, though he was confident that his strength would soon return. Fox he was not sure of. The man seemed to be all laughs and principles, yet the man's wife was a hard case — who just might have reason to carp as she did. Remembering too well, however, his present situation, he being in a strange town in an equally strange country with little more than a shilling to his name — a few coins overlooked by his assailant — and only the clothes he stood up in, he could see he had no choice immediately but to accept whatever it was this man was offering him. Harry took the job, with thanks.

‘To the Banksia, then m’boy! Let’s take a drink to whatever resolve we like. Any port in a storm, eh?’

Together, Harry Coates and Cecil Fox crossed the road in front of the produce store and walked towards the tavern.

‘One thing, Harry lad’ Fox advised, halting in his tracks, placing a restraining hand on his new employee’s shoulder, ‘Ports in storms or out can be treacherously difficult to enter. Persevere in your approach to this one, even if the going’s rough. Once inside, things’ll pan out just fine.’ he said, before dropping his arm and resuming his designed way towards the door of the public house.

Harry had no idea what this piece of advice referred to, took it and stored it away, following after his perplexing companion warily but never so slowly as to lose sight of him as, one behind the other, the pair entered the gloomy interior of a drinking hole no less shabby than the one Harry had first experienced in the colony.

CHAPTER Four

Something else needs to be known before we proceed. By the early 'thirties, one half of my grandparents had fled this life, another quarter was terminally ill and the remainder had, like Omar's winged bird of time "but a little way to fly". Who am I to say that these occurrences were not in anticipation of or as a result of my arrival? Throughout my childhood, I never considered my grand-parents' actions as anything else but treachery. Had they stayed and burned as did the awesome paternal, I would have been grateful. At least I would have known them and had gripping stories to tell of their passing. Instead, all I have of them are recitations conveyed to me in versions quite inconsistent, coloured by the mood of the jongleur and the hue of the blue of the moment of telling.

Let me explain: Alma's Jack was alternately worthy raconteur, dreadful liar, terror of the cutting-room floor in terms of seamstresses' morals, citizen of note, bedevilled by ignorance of his origins, erratic pilot of a succession of Rugby tourers, pipe-smoking consumptive and, finally, dubious benefactor. Alma was variously sainted, vicious, minute, frail; a cheeky, short-arsed Pom (Father to Coventry for two weeks after that one) tragic, forgiving, relentless in pursuit of her beliefs, dying aged seventy-two, much to the surprise of her children — who had thought all their lives that she was ten years younger.

Eliza (paternal side, daughter of Samuel, tin-miner from Lostwithiel in Cornwall) was the whitest woman on earth — one uncle's view — end of story. For many years I used to wonder just how white she may have been, and if she was, all over? If it was just her face, she couldn't have been very healthy, though perhaps she used a lot of powder which, if that were the case, would change the perception of her character a lot.

Albert Simon (paternal, again), by report was also a swine.

* * * * *

'Mrs Fox and I came to this colony nearly twenty years ago,' Fox responded to Harry's enquiry. 'Unlike some, we didn't leave our country for our country's good — which after all was a witticism adopted by the toffs to keep society in its place. We came out here to get away from that sort of attitude ... and what did we find?' Harry's interlocutor paused here to take a pull from the pint pot he had been using to butt his listener with. 'The bloody toffs had got here before us. They were trying — pretty well successfully — to impose the same strictures upon the few poor creatures in this community as they had at home. They had

tried to create an image of that with which they were most familiar and to implant themselves in positions of power such as belonged to elder sons of hereditary lords and ladies and princes and so forth.'

'Shut up, Foxey!' someone at the bar complained. 'We've heard all that before — and it isn't true.'

'So speaketh the *canaille*, Harry. Ignore them, lad. They are a rude lot,' sniffed Fox.

'Where else in the world can you do pretty well as you damn well like, Foxey?' another voice taunted.

'In most places where there are no Peelers to stop you, you scoundrel,' the merchant replied, immediately continuing to express his opinions to Harry. 'They have built churches in the only style they know — and ended up with tawdry architectural imitations or, like Perth's Town Hall, a building so unsuited to the climate that in summer it is virtually uninhabitable in the day-time. They have tried to force the environment to serve foreign ends and, as a result, are so discontent with it that they have made the facility to "go home" a mark of their social superiority.'

'Go home yourself, Foxey. On second thoughts, you can stay. I wouldn't wish *that* on my worst enemy,' came again from the region of gloom containing the bench serving as a bar, "*that*" being Mrs Fox even newcomer Harry understood.

"'Cast not the first stone" as the good book says, my boy. There may be gold in it,' came the enigmatic rejoinder. 'As I was saying, Harry, don't expect the attitudes of people — who count, Bilsey — to be any different, underneath, here than they were in England. Years, centuries, might elapse in Australia before a truly native culture develops — if it ever does. And speaking of things native — what models of approach have we constructed in respect of the blacks here that differ so vastly from the master and slave relationships we superior whites enforce upon black people wherever in the world we encounter them?'

'Jeez! Who'd 'a thought it! Foxey's a bloody nigger lover, now! Do your Agnes know it, Cecil?'

Hoots of laughter filled the bar room. Harry's brain was spinning enough without taking to it the deeper philosophies as propounded by his employer. Cecil Fox had been talking about matters beyond the immediate interest of a one-time miner accustomed to scrounging a living for self and family. From the age of eight, Harry had been "on the mine" most of

his waking hours. Picky-boy first, then interminable-seeming shifts spent in the cavernous gloom below ground hardly engendered any sense of altruism. One day a week, if coincidentally the sun happened to shine, life on earth above ground latterly in his career was a novelty. A bath, then dressing in clean, strange-feeling, different-smelling clothes. Chapel then, desperately trying to stay awake in the strong, unfamiliar light. A ritual Sunday dinner when there was food to be spared for such an occasion, a few precious hours of roaming on the moors, perhaps for the whole family, if Da didn't go to sleep after dinner; but certainly for the children — the young slaves of the mines allowed for once to act their age in an hour or two of freedom. Many Sundays, though, were miserably wet. Once your coat was soaked, there was nothing for it but to go indoors and huddle by the miserly fire kept burning on the hearth; to play silly games or simply watch the water dribbling down the window panes while waiting for your Monday-morning core to begin ...

Harry felt someone at his shoulder shaking him.

'It's too bloody early in your young life to begin reminiscing, my boy. There are years left for you to enjoy or endure. Meanwhile, the mundanities of earning a living must be attended to,' Fox opined with a sigh. 'Luxuriate in self-pity a little, lad. You were meant to, otherwise one would not possess this faculty. Horses, on the other hand, as far as I know, see the present and the future only, and have the legs to run away from the latter, should its prospects displease them — but only if they have the fuel for it. And that's our job on earth for the next five or six hours, today — to ensure that the equine brutes of the town have the fodder to power them.'

Harry deduced from this that it was time for him to start work, or rather, to start to learn his new employment. Horses were no favourites of his. Only as mine drags had he ever to rely upon them — nor had his dreams ever held the prospect of him owning one. It would not be long before he was to realize that to own a horse or to have the ability to hire some form of horse transport in this country was an essential, or else be confined to river transport. Walking was an option; but distances between settlements were great. The weather, the terrain and the thick scrub with which the landscape was covered, too, were not generally conducive to travel on foot.

'Drink up, Harry lad. It's time to open up. One day ... but no ... what chance is there to find a kindred soul at this end of the earth? Never look for brain here, my boy.'

‘Garn, Foxey. Get back to the missus and that wild filly yer keep locked up in yer yard.’

‘Yeah. What’s the matter, Foxey? Afraid to turn her out into the paddock? That girl’ll have to learn to take the weight of a stallion sooner or later.’

The horse fodder Cecil Fox dealt in was hay, oaten mostly in sheaves, oats in sacks, chaff for the well-to-do, cozened, pampered ones and for the hard-working draughts which lumbered with the heavy tasks of professional hauliers, contractors and the like. Milled products such as pollard and bran Fox also supplied to dairy men, poulterers and pig farmers, though mostly these substances were obtained by buyers direct from the mills. The bulk of Fremantle’s working horses, however, dined on victuals supplied by Fox’s yard. Fox seemed to possess the knack of convincing his customers that the oats obtained from his sacks drove a horse to superior feats of labour, devotion and tractability such as no other produce merchant’s could equal. His business was thriving.

Harry’s hours of work were long. It took him no time at all to learn the lay-out of the port or to find his way around the town. When not delivering fodder, he was back at the yard, making up orders, cutting hay into chaff, unloading and stacking incoming goods, keeping the delivery wagon, chains and harness in good repair and tending to the Percheron draught, personified as Ned.

Ned took a lot of convincing to like his new handler, whom he eventually deigned to hold in affection. This was following a few alarming periods without food, when on his first few delivery rounds, Harry forgot to fill the old nag’s nosebag.

Fox meanwhile, once Harry was able to be left to get on with his duties, returned to the saddlery side of the business, he being a saddler by trade. Agnes Fox, while still holding suspicions of the boy, had grudgingly accepted his presence at the meal table. But she had also “accidentally” included his recently acquired spare pair of trousers in the family laundry and was secretly responsible — only once, so far — for putting a small vase of flowers on the packing case chest in his room.

As for the mysterious Margaret, whose chastity Agnes had accused her husband of squandering when he first proposed that Harry should join the firm, little was known. Margaret helped in the yard by sowing up the bags of chaff Harry produced, and mended any mouse holes in the oat sacks as they appeared. She helped in the house, too, but took her meals in an alcove across the kitchen, away from the main table. She spoke only if

spoken to and made her replies as brief as possible. Contrary to the generous character Harry had ascribed to the man, Fox rarely spoke to the girl and when he did, so filled his words with sarcasm as to make even the boy wince on the girl's behalf. Agnes too, in Harry's view treated the girl peculiarly. In Harry's presence Mrs Fox had never been heard to address one word to the girl yet strangely, Margaret's welfare had been defended so strongly by the older woman when Harry first came into the house.

Margaret was perhaps seventeen or even younger than himself, Harry guessed. She had long, dark hair which she wore loose and skin as white as milk. Her eyes, too, were dark — Harry was unsure of the exact colour of them because the girl would never look directly at him whenever the necessity of his words demanded of her a response. She was no great beauty, Harry decided. Margaret was pretty maybe, but she fired in him no urge to get to know her well. Belinda, or Rosa Compton: they were beauties. Poor Margaret cast against these perfections found no place in the young man's eye. Besides, there was no room in the dreamer's mind for any other girl but Rosa, however hopeless the boy held his passion for her to be. All the time, he clung to his earlier-formed vision of Rosa as vigorously as a believer might cling to the memory of a saint. The idea of allowing another to encroach in his mind upon this all but sacred image made Harry's insecurity palpable, tangible, to him. In his mind, he was Rosa's lover. In his unleavened romanticism, love's sentiments wildly rampaged within him, uncontrolled, at all times, without relief; without him wanting relief from the exquisite agony he suffered.

Apart from his nightly dreaming — mostly awake, but sometimes joyfully not, in the volatility of his youth, the young Cornishman had little time or wish to ponder too deeply on any subject, not even his own future. He was enjoying his work with the unusual Fox, who left him alone much of the time, now that he had become familiar with the tasks of a produce supplier and knew the town. Indeed, there were times when Harry wished for a little less independence to act for the business. Already he was receiving incomings, signing chits on his principal's behalf and consigning orders by carrier whenever the size of a purchase was too great or urgent for Ned to haul and deliver. Gradually, he was taking over the daily running of the yard. Eight months after he was first engaged, Harry found himself actually left in charge while Fox "examined the region" for the state of its crops upon which reckoning he could place his contracts to buy.

Revelling in the unaccustomed long hours of sunlight, Harry was able to spend his time off — Sundays always, with the occasional half day during the week. He enjoyed

wandering along the beaches. Sometimes he fished — at the river mouth where a plentiful supply of herring ran for much of the season, as well as whiting, the exciting tailor and other edible, larger fish of species whose names Harry was learning. Only at dusk on these days did he sense his isolation. He knew little of the boundaries that constrained him, but was aware of the featureless-ness of the immediate landscape and its strange harshness. He could only guess at the breadth of the relatively un-populated hinterland surrounding the two settlements he had seen. Some, he had heard, called it the barren western half of a continent, best forgotten. Harry reckoned that whoever had so spoken had never known the depths of a Cornish tin or copper mine. Here, he was free! Everyone could be free! A new life, Harry was sure, awaited him in this marvellous place in which, despite his own raw beginning, a full and rich experience was waiting for him.

Returning to the “Yard”, as he had learned to call it as did Fox its proprietor, late on a summer Sunday evening, Harry sensed a difference. Was it quieter than he expected? He wasn't sure, yet there was a definite feeling that something had changed.

Fox was away at York in connection with six hundred bushels of un-delivered oats, without which the business would be unable to meet its winter contracts. The yard was thus without the usual tinkling sounds that the saddler produced as he worked. Anyway, it was Sunday: Cecil Fox was a strong supporter of the idle Sabbath, not on religious grounds but simply for the legitimacy the day gave to him doing nothing. This he admitted freely and openly, with an honesty that few of his day could match.

Intrigued, Harry began searching for an explanation of the sense of foreboding lingering in the quiet atmosphere around him. He checked the yard, saw Ned nodding asleep on his feet, his usual state when not leaning into a load. He moved into the barn, searched the office, the loft, the saddlery shop in turn and found nothing. Still his uneasiness remained. There was only the house left. Did he dare climb up to the mezzanine to begin checking out that domain of the fierce Mrs Fox?

While waiting for an answer to this query he had set himself, in the stillness he heard the faint sound as if of someone sobbing. Harry put a foot on the stair. It creaked, The sobbing seemed to stop. He advanced another step, paused, listened. Nothing. Not a sound reached his ears, yet he knew that two people were in the house. Mrs Fox only rarely went out and not at all on Sundays except to church and the time for that was well passed. Margaret, to his knowledge, had never set foot outside the yard gate. She never even went

near the gate if she could help it. He must find the source of the mystery, as mystery Harry was sure there was, now that he had reasoned it out. What was that! Sobbing, again.

Without hesitation the young man took the remaining stairs two at a time and literally burst into the kitchen, flinging back the badly hung ledge and brace that dragged on the floor every time it was moved as he did so.

A scream split the silence! At first Harry could see nothing. The light was bad. Gradually the outline of a figure resolved in the gloom. It was Margaret. She had been sitting at the table. She had been weeping, too, he could tell.

Try as she might, the girl was unable to restrain the tears from coming again. She collapsed back onto the chair, lowered her head onto her arms spread on the table-top, and began weeping with such persuasion that Harry felt a lump rise in his own throat.

He moved towards her, placed a consoling hand on her shoulder, heard the girl gasp, felt her shrink away from him. Few times in his life had Harry seen tears without visible injury or at least its aftermath.

‘Margaret?’ Harry spoke softly, as he had not done since to his Ma, back in the village, but the girl made no answer except to get on with her crying. Harry grasped Margaret’s shoulder more firmly this time. ‘Lass,’ he said: ‘I be no help to you lest you speak.’ But still no audible response came to him. Uncertain, the boy was loath to take his commiseration further. But he could think clearly enough to look around him for the cause of Margaret’s distress. He was not long in locating it.

Agnes Fox lay on the floor in the little hall-like room from which access to the bedrooms in the house was obtained. She was unconscious. The lady was still breathing; wasn’t dead — that was certain. What was he to do? Margaret couldn’t be of much help — or could she? Harry sped back to the kitchen, where the girl, quieter now still maintained the position in which he had left her.

‘Margaret, you must help me. Margaret!’

The girl ignored him and would not raise her head. She began sobbing again.

‘Margaret!’

Eventually the Margaret was persuaded to lift her eyes to his. His heart almost melted. He had seen that look in the eyes of wives and sweethearts at the pithead more than once. His mother, his sister, probably stood throughout the hours of lonely waiting for himself ...

Without hesitation he lifted up the girl in his strong arms and held her to him. Fresh weeping overcame the lass but these, he could tell, were the tears of relief.

Margaret attempted to speak.

‘Hush, my love. Take your time lass. It be a hard thing, I know; but I do need your help. Be there a doctor nearby? I have no knowledge myself. I need you to tell me.’

He saw the girl shake her head despairingly. ‘Not far,’ she managed ‘but I’m not sure in which direction.’

‘Right,’ he said. ‘You sit there, sweetheart ... I’ll be not long away. They’ll know over at the *Banksia*. Don’t worry, I’ll be back soon.’

‘Do tell it be Foxey’s lucky day!’

‘Please!’ Harry begged.

‘Do the man a favour, Cousin Jack! Slip past the sawbones and go straight to Mellows,’ a voice in the shadows advised. Unknown to Harry at the time, Syd Mellows was the local farrier who supplemented his business with the undertaker’s trade.

‘Is he a doctor, too?’

‘You could say that lad.’

‘Then where might I find him, please.’

‘He could be out digging, or he could be hammerin’ in nails or he might be doing a bit of carpentering or he could be layin’ out or measurin’ even.’

‘Take no notice of that clever bastard, son. Oop road, three or four chains, low porch, wattle and daub, picket fence, bloody great black dog as pernicketty as his owner, won’t hurt yer as likely it is his housekeeper will, lives Doctor Hardwick. Yer might be lucky enough for ‘im to like yer mug an’ ‘elp yer.’

An hour later, once Harry had located the home of the doctor, had overcome his housekeeper’s reluctance to disturb the man and had waited for him to dress and be escorted back to the yard, Agnes was showing greater signs of life than previously. Margaret had been tending her but, on seeing the doctor with Harry, the girl fled to her bedroom at their approach.

The declining sun now penetrated the diamond shapes of the small window’s lead-lighting, allowing sufficient light for the doctor to make his initial diagnosis.

‘She may be moved,’ he announced, and looked expectantly at Harry.

Tentatively, without an alternative, Harry opened the left-hand door of the pair which gave access to the hallway. This, apparently, was a store room of sorts. He quickly closed that door and with more confidence opened the other. This one offered better prospects; beyond it, clearly, was the Foxes' bedroom.

The doctor who was at his elbow also peered into the room, "humph"-ed with satisfaction and said: 'Right, if you and the young lady could move the patient here and place her on the bed, I would be able to continue my examination of her', his tone of voice and attitude making it quite clear that his professional status could debar him from contributing any assistance in this matter.

'You'll have to be the other half of the team, doctor. The young lady is too ill herself to help, I'm afraid,' Harry lied.

'Too ill? Are you sure? The girl looked perfectly able to me. Some physical activity in moments such as these can have a remarkably salutary effect both upon the spirits and the flesh.'

Harry took some time to process the doctor's pomposity, which was just as well. In the interim the medico seemed to lose patience and to concede that his maintenance of any position before this oaf was pointless.

'Very well, but I will need soap and hot water when I have finished. You can arrange that, I suppose?'

After they lowered Agnes onto the bed Harry looked hard at the man but nodded, then left the room. The doctor closed the door after him.

About to left-turn into the kitchen, Harry was struck by another idea. He decided to chance his arm in the matter of the mystery of the girl in the house. He turned right, up the stairs, whereupon reaching the door of Margaret's room, he knocked and entered.

Margaret lay face down on the bed. She was no longer crying. Gingerly, Harry sat on the edge of the mattress, his hand within reach of her shoulder. He dared reach out gently. The moment his fingers touched her, he felt her shudder, yet she endured his presence.

'Margaret, turn over and look at me, at least,' Harry urged.

Slowly, fearfully the girl complied.

'Tell me, Margaret! What is the matter? Who are you in this house? Why does your father treat you the way he does?'

Margaret simply stared at him.

‘Please, Margaret’ he begged, ‘I want to know. We could be friends. But we must talk to each other. Agnes,’ Harry continued, ‘she’s your mother, right?’

The girl nodded, staring intently at him, as though fearful that if he asked another question she might not want to answer it.

‘And Cecil? He is your father?’

Margaret shook her head savagely.

Harry looked lost for a few moments. ‘Oh! I understand. Cecil’s your ... ’ No, he decided, he didn’t understand at all.

Just then, Harry heard the doctor exit the bedroom below, remembered the hot water he had requested, bent and gently kissed Margaret on the forehead then hastened down the stairs to the kitchen, where a kettle of water steamed on the stove hob. Placing an enamelled bowl on the table Harry poured in the hot water then some cold from a ewer which also stood on the table, found soap and a drying cloth in the scullery then stood back while the doctor solemnly performed his ablutions.

‘The lady — your mother? She is gravely ill but not necessarily mortally so, young man. She has had a stroke, from the effects of which she may or may not recover to some extent. She will require nursing of the most intimate kind. It is well that your sister is in the house to attend to the lady. If that were not so then a home nurse would be the only acceptable alternative. The lady’s husband — a produce merchant? — is away you say. Fox? How strange I have never heard of him. I shall call again on Tuesday when, perhaps, I can expect to speak to the man of the house? Give the patient broth, broth only — if indeed she becomes able to swallow.’

The doctor fastidiously drying his hands as he spoke, now donned his coat, took his hat which he clutched to his chest in one hand, his medical bag in the other and stood by the door, waiting to be ushered down the stairs and out into the street.

Harry returned from the yard gate to find Margaret up and fussing quite naturally about her mother.

‘I know. I heard,’ was all she would say when Harry attempted to repeat the doctor’s diagnosis. Despite his several sorties to open a conversation with the girl, he accepted failure with her in the end and went back to the yard, to tend to Ned and lock the street door

again and to wonder what lay in store for their little community now so badly disrupted. And what of Margaret? Should he go back upstairs and force her to speak to him? What of the implications, should he do this? Did he really *want* to become involved with a girl he found to be so utterly strange and beyond his experience? At once, in his imagination, he fled to Rosa Compton. Margaret had no chance, thereafter.

CHAPTER Five

‘Your Uncle Reggie would have loved this place,’ Mrs Capstock remarked, watching the frenzied waves out of an angry ocean race in to thunder onto the beach. The two women had trudged arduously through sand dunes to reach the pounding surf. ‘Reggie loved a storm. He liked nothing better than to walk down to the harbour to watch the swell crashing into the breakwater. He would come home soaked to the skin from the spray, he’d get that close. It was as though he was communicating with his God. A strange obsession — for a bootmaker. So I thought it would be a nice gesture of remembrance of him to come out here today. You don’t mind, do you love?’ the lady added, mildly shocked, herself by her action of asking her niece to accompany her. ‘I’m sorry, dear. I didn’t think,’ she amended, before Rosa could affirm or deny that she “minded” at all.

‘Don’t worry, Aunt Gemima,’ Rosa reassured the older woman. ‘I loved Uncle Reggie too, you know!’

‘I was sure you did, dear. I suppose that’s why ... Good Lord! Just look at that one!’

Just then, a particularly big roller reared up, curled and crashed, covering the beach with its foam and froth. Spray and wind-blown sand filled the air. The gale rose, the temperature seeming to drop as rain clouds blown landwards loomed closer.

‘I think we had better go before that lot reaches town, dearest. Come along.’

Not entertaining the necessity to confer on this decision, Mrs Capstock turned from the sea and began the long tramp back to the sandy track which would lead them into the docks area of the town. Smiling, Rosa silently followed.

Although Rosa’s Uncle Reggie was considered by some to be an eccentric, when he died from lockjaw through, it was suspected, his contact with the boots of farmers attracted to his business by the reputation the cobbler had made for himself over the years, his savings had enabled Aunt Gemima to consider for herself a new start in life.

Living on the south coast of Cornwall among fisher-folk had never really been her cup of tea, but Reggie had won her heart at first and her respect in time. While he was alive, she had hinted to him from time to time that a change of air might be beneficial to them, though she had drawn up short of giving her real reason for wanting the move.

It was her own mother who had instilled in her daughter’s mind the possibility that her childlessness might be due to the sea air. Even though Gemima could see that her mother’s idea was flawed, as evidenced by the harvest of babies netted every year by the wives of the

fishermen, her yearning for a child of her own was very powerful. When her time to hope had finally passed, just as she had decided to make the best of the rest of her life, her Reggie took ill and died.

As his business had such good reports of it, his widow had no trouble disposing of it, the opportunity presented by it being on the market attracting to it a man from St Ives who, having once deserted bootmaking for a shot at tin streaming now wished to settle back into his trade, satisfied he would never be a mine owner after all.

With the money from the business and from the sale of her furniture added to Reggie's savings, Gemima found herself reasonably well-off by fisher-folks' standards and in a moment which she never entertained once thereafter as being a rash one, she had decided to emigrate and began a search for a companion in adventure.

No one of Gemima's acquaintance in the little fishing village really fitted the picture Gemima had of herself. She was almost at the point of "coming to her senses" as friends expected she would, once the shock of losing her husband palled, when a letter arrived from her sister, in which missive "her ladyship" as Gemima called "our Myrtle", complained about the restlessness in her daughter, Rosa — among other things. Gemima's sister Myrtle had been born a whiner, so the family thought, and all pitied Gordon Compton when they heard that he had proposed marriage — though, since a toad is a diamond in a duck's eye, all had the good sense to understand, and let the poor fellow into their ranks.

Rosa, the couple's only child, now, was a different kettle of fish to her mother. Rosa was happy, fun-seeking, well-spoken and possessed of the good dress sense that had somehow almost totally evaded her parent. Of this last-mentioned of the girl's qualities 'Heaven knows where she learned it. Never from her mother' Gemima had remarked numerous times to Reggie in recent years.

As a young girl, Rosa had been sent to her aunt's now and then for holidays mostly, and whenever Myrtle, her mother, had been prescribed a rest cure — as happened at least once a year. Niece and Aunt had forged a bond, both being of the same nature in many ways and so Gemima, as she read Myrtle's letter again, could not understand why she had not given her niece a thought.

That very night, as she sat in her cosy front room, burning some of the last of the sea coal Reggie had spent his Sundays gathering at the foot of the cliffs whenever the tide was right, listening to the wind moaning in the eaves and the soft splash of rain against the

window, Gemima wrote just a few words on the back of a picture post-card and addressed it immediately to Rosa. It said simply: “Australia! Are you interested?”

By the end of the week, Gemima had Rosa’s reply, which said: “Yes! When? Coming down Tuesday’s mid-day train.” and “Don’t leave without me! Love, Rosa.”

That had been a far cry from Fremantle. Consulting shipping agents, as Gemima did with a thoroughness only she could muster, advice was that, if it was Swan River she had in mind, to which Arabella Watson, Gemima’s friend since girlhood had migrated three years previously, then a widowed lady with a mature young woman’s assistance, both of whom wishing to migrate, could do no better than to establish a boarding house for better-class patronage at the port of Fremantle. Finding a suitable house might be a problem, Gemima was told but also that such premises did exist and, since the population at the top end of colonial society tended to come and go almost as frequently as some of the lower classes, a structure of the sort being discussed was sure to become vacant, given time.

That was good enough for Gemima. Besides, she would need time, as would Rosa, should the dear child actually agree to accompany her on the venture.

‘Nothing to conjecture on that point,’ Gemima was thinking as she and Rosa made their way back to their lodgings; ‘The girl is here, beside me.’

‘My dear Rosa! Forgive me! I must seem terribly morose to you!’ Gemima apologised effusively. ‘Lost in my thoughts again, I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t worry. I have some of my own from time to time,’ Rosa replied sweetly.

‘Yes, poor thing. I suppose you do.’ Gemima was guilty of supposing that Rosa was not enjoying her life.

‘Who’s the “poor thing”, I’d like to know, Aunt?’ Rosa spiritedly demanded, though still smiling.

‘There I go again: living my life and yours, too. Sorry, my dear.’

Rosa simply entwined her arm with that of her aunt’s, said nothing more and so together they reached the entrance to the street. Here it was necessary for them to disengage their arms and step warily as they made their way over the unpaved surface to the guest house where, for the time being, the pair had settled in lodgings.

‘I say, Aunt — wasn’t it strange that two people should go missing like that,’ Rosa called from her bedroom where she stood before the wall mirror in order to un-pin her hat.

‘Two, dear?’ her aunt replied, at the same time performing a similar ritual of her own. Both bedrooms were furnished identically. ‘Captain Sommers — most peculiar. But two, dear? I don’t recall ... ’

‘That young miner, Harry ... Harry what was his other name?’

‘Oh! Don’t ask me, Rosa. How did you ... I don’t think I ever heard it. Was he nice, dear?’

‘I thought so. They say he made terrible noises in the night ... something to do with him recently having been trapped in a mine, they said.’

‘Poor man. That’s better,’ said Gemima Capstock, having rearranged her hair to her satisfaction. ‘Shall we go down for tea, Rosa? Rosa, are you ready?’

‘Always, Aunt!’ the younger woman quipped, suddenly appearing in the passage way. ‘A lovely idea, Aunt Gemima — afternoon tea. Mrs Armstrong, here we come.’

The child’s equanimity never failed to impress Gemima. Looking at this niece of hers, the older lady wondered yet again if she really deserved such an agreeable companion.

Rosa had barely descended the stairs en-route to the dining room where the landlady of Clematis House fed her guests, before the errant Captain Sommers’ daughter, detecting her tread, burst into the entrance hall and flew noisily into her arms.

‘I’ve made a cake!’ the girl announced proudly, lifting her impish face to Rosa’s. ‘Mrs Armstrong let me do everything! You should see it! We are having it for afternoon tea, Mrs Armstrong says, if you’d like to,’ the girl happily babbled.

‘Mrs Armstrong has been good to you,’ Rosa observed smoothing the child’s hair lovingly.

‘Yes! And she says I can help her tomorrow, as well, if I like.’

‘Lovely,’ Mrs Capstock interposed.

‘Aunt Gemima! Mrs Armstrong helped me make a cake!’ Charlotte enthused, still nestled into Rosa, against whom she anchored herself as tightly as any trochus to a rock.

‘I heard, child,’ replied Gemima, more flatly than she intended. ‘Shall we go in?’ Rosa’s aunt enquired, nodding towards the dining room.

Harry Coates had seen Rosa Compton in the company of a young girl — a child he thought he knew but at once could not place — as he was driving old Ned and his wagon

along South Terrace towards the port. The two figures had all at once descended the steps of the shipping agent's offices.

To him, Rosa looked as beautiful as ever. The child though, was not too happy, he thought. Rosa, on reaching roadway level, placed her arm protectively around her companion's shoulders. This seemed to make the young girl appear much less forlorn and — in Harry's eyes, at least — enhanced Rosa's beauty enormously. He wished he could pull up old Ned, step down from his "carriage" and sweep this desirable young woman off her feet and into his arms, just as Sir Hugh had dealt with the lovely Marietta on the eve of Waterloo, in the novel loaned to him by Cecil Fox and which Harry was laboriously reading at night.

Harry's reluctance to acknowledge himself to Rosa was not so much driven by any sense of propriety as an awareness of how he himself must appear. No great dress sense was expected to manifest itself in a drayman, nor was cleanliness of any particular consideration. His contact with the people of the town was with stable hands and cellarmen, with labourers as a rule and with delivery men like himself and tradesmen. He lumped sacks, stacked hay, threw bags of coal into fuel storerooms, shovelled dung in Fox's yard and operated the chaff cutter. His set of clothes in use served every purpose. It was often hot work. Sometimes, like today when the weather was wet and windy, he would huddle under a layer of sacks as he supervised old Ned's meandering over muddy streets and sweat still in the muggy heat produced by his body. And though bathed regularly, this was on a weekly basis. In short, Harry was conscious of the fact that he stank. He also believed that fine ladies such as Rosa would never respond kindly to being addressed familiarly, especially not by a passing wagon driver.

So, under cover of his battered hat well pulled down and a week's growth of whiskers, Harry felt emboldened to stare out at this especial pedestrian without any real fear of being recognized or of having to reveal himself, much as he yearned to do so.

Today being Sunday, Harry got ready his weekly bath. This ritual required first that he should empty and scour with coarse sand the tub which, when not employed for human's ablutions, held old Ned's drinking water. Margaret, and before her illness, Agnes, had their own arrangements, Harry guessed, since he had never been required to scour the tub for them. Mr Fox sometimes, but not regularly, took a bath, however.

In the yard, Harry had earlier set a fire under the large “missionary” pot — a relic acquired by Mr Fox from some whaling venture which had failed. In the pot’s original purpose, it had been used to boil up whale blubber for its oil.

The water in the pot, when he tested its temperature, was just about right, Harry guessed. He disappeared into the barn and returned moments later with a wooden, iron-bound bucket, using this to begin the business of transferring the hot water from the pot in the yard to the tub in the barn, the last of the water being used to carefully douse the fire over which the pot rested precariously on its stone supports.

Privacy had never been an imperative in Harry’s family. In a small, miner’s cottage — one of two rooms — with an enclosed lean-to privacy, except on a whole-family basis, had never been a possibility. When all was to hand — a rough bar of coarse, un-scented soap, a long-handled brush, a rather colour-less piece of salvaged cloth that most likely had begun life as a window curtain, a pair of clean drawers, a shirt, some new dark hose which represented his latest purchase and a coat, clean and dark, obtained only last week from the second-hand clothier’s near the quay — Harry was ready.

Seconds later, he had divested himself of his weekly working rags and lowered himself into the tub. He lay back and let the warm water soothe him, content in this return to the roots of his life. Happily anticipating a stroll through the town to the port where, as usual, he would tour the docks looking at the ships tied up there, seeing the sailors compelled to take a day of rest fishing, drinking, calling out to him often in words of languages he could not understand.

Harry was not sure how long he lay lost in this simple luxury before the cooling water returned him to reality. Suddenly he became aware of the necessity to begin scrubbing away the accumulated grime of the past week and so set to work, vigorously splashing water over his head and shoulders with his cupped hands. He washed his hair and felt his beard, wondering if he should first have shaved before taking his bath. A moment’s contemplation decided him. He sprang out of the tub, quickly snatched the piece of broken mirror off the small shelf on the nearby wall and with it and a cut-throat razor then dashed back into the warmth of the tub water. Propping the glass in the handle of the vessel, after adding soap to his rather vestigial beard, Harry opened the razor, gingerly tested its edge then commenced to scrape away the two week’s growth encumbering his visage — keeping in his mind the image of himself he must have presented to Rosa on board the Dorian. By chance, would today be the day he would have the yearned-for encounter with that divine

creature? Rosa! — she whose beautiful form and features had filled not only his waking dreams but, delightfully, a recent night's as well.

Pre-occupied by these thoughts, Harry could never have ever been aware that he was being observed or that his naked body was being yearned over with that same intensity of interest as in his imagination his own instincts served him in respect of Rosa Compton.

When, however, from the loft above, more pieces of straw than the wind ever dislodged suddenly floated down and were captured in their descent as images in his shaving mirror, Harry's day-dreaming ended. He stopped shaving — he had finished, anyway. He reached over the side of the tub and laid the now-folded razor on the floor. He also put the piece of mirror aside, then allowed his body to slide forward, his knees to rise up and his head to sink into the water.

From this attitude, he was able to look up and backwards, to a certain extent. He could certainly see the edge of the loft floor without difficulty. Not Mr Fox, surely? Who else?

As casually as his concern allowed, Harry sat upright then got out of his bath, dried himself, and with his drawers in his hand, he moved back into the shadows beneath the loft where he could not be seen. Quickly ignoring his drawers, after wrapping his towel-cloth about his waist, he crept stealthily around the horizontal poles supporting old Ned's harness and began to silently, slowly, climb the rough ladder leading to the platform above. Nearing the top of the ladder Harry stopped, even subduing his breathing. As quietly and slowly as he could manage he now raised himself the few extra inches necessary for him to see onto the platform floor. Who was it?

Margaret! It was Margaret who had been spying on him as he bathed! Harry smiled to himself. She lay on her stomach, apparently searching for him, her head almost over the loft edge.

Emboldened by his disappearance, Margaret soon was on her knees, her hands gripping the edge of the boards. She was leaning forward into the void, straining to catch another glimpse of him.

Harry grinned. Something of a rare playfulness stirred him. Noiselessly he eased himself onto the landing and, still undetected, crept towards the girl, intending to slap her bottom and, hopefully, send her flying over the edge of the floor to tumble into the store of Ned's hay, below.

His right hand extended, he was about to set in motion the hoped-for sequence of events when Margaret suddenly sensed his presence, turned on him, collapsed on the floor and lay whimpering, an arm raised to protect her face, as if expecting a blow.

Harry stood. He was confused, now. He looked down at the girl and as he did so, saw her arm relax, revealing her widely staring eyes and the hint of a smile gradually widening. Harry gasped involuntarily. Not only had his towel slipped to the floor but his natural instincts were quiveringly betraying him.

Margaret stretched herself on the boards before him, twitched her skirt a little more revealingly and reached up for him without a word being spoken ...

He waited. Margaret relaxed, sighed, lay still on the straw-covered boards and became silent again, refusing to let her eyes meet his. She lay on her back, still. Harry sat beside her as if unaware of his nakedness, his hands on his spread knees, his staring, downcast eyes contemptuously regarding the traitor lying smugly at rest between his thighs. He, too, said nothing.

In some moments more he glanced at the girl. Her bodice was open, her breasts were bare. He saw Margaret shudder beneath his glance. The girl's right hand was somewhere in her hair, her left hand began to move beneath her skirt.

Gentle, whimpering sounds reached Harry's ears, sounds whose import he had been made very aware of very early in his life. They were the sounds of men and women together; of his mother and father at home, men and women, and the bigger girls and boys in the pits. Once, he had come across Franny Shaddick in Cavey Wood with her Gilbert. She then was whimpering just as Margaret was now. Gilbert, he remembered, was looking a bit puzzled by the effect on the girl his hand was producing but, as Franny seemed to be holding it in a grip of steel, poor Gilbert had had no choices in the matter. The selfish bitch was doing nothing for Gilbert, reciprocally, Harry had noted; but that was Franny Shaddick for you ... Now, he had treated this strange girl no better. He had followed his instincts with no thought of her needs. How was he any better than ...

Self-accusatively day dreaming away his Sunday, however, was not on Harry's agenda. Whatever implications his behaviour with Margaret today might have for him would have to wait. Today he was going to town and today might be just the day when he, looking respectable in his best clothes, including his new stockings, just might bump into Rosa Compton ... A huge sob wrenched his frame as the present reality and its recent events

asserted itself. What should he do? Laugh? Cry? Curse this girl who had wrecked his fantasy? Or should he ignore their recent familiarity as being simply an accidental meeting, take up where he had left off and resume the pursuit of his imagined life with Rosa? Was Rosa betrayed? Did she ever need to know about Margaret?

Harry resolutely descended the ladder from the loft and plunged again into the now barely tepid bath-water, climbed out, dried himself, picked up and donned his discarded drawers, up-ended his bath-tub with difficulty, it being so heavy, then replaced the empty vessel in old Ned's stable, making two trips to the well in the yard for fresh water then threw down the bucket, said 'That'll have to do you, Neddie boy,' to the horse, drew on his shirt, combed out his hair until all the knots in it were loosened, completed dressing — lastly proudly donning his new, second-hand jacket — then adjudged himself ready for the fray.

In his trouser pocket he carried half a sovereign, while in his coat pocket was a handkerchief, even though he still preferred to clear his nose in the traditional way.

Harry in shoes now, another "luxury purchase", walked to the doorway of the barn. He paused before going out into the bright sunshine pouring into the yard, turned, looked back and up to the loft. 'Goodbye, Margaret!' he called cheerfully, with a chuckle, then disappeared from view.

Cecil Fox smiled happily as from the small window on the mezzanine floor above in his living quarters he watched his young partner, as he now called Harry, depart for the town.

CHAPTER Six

Clutching their inheritance, received following the demise of Grandfather Jack, off they went to the vendor where they signed up, paid the required deposit and guaranteed to repay a pound a week forever-ish. Then, it seems, Mother and Father had a look around. Still, they would have thought, a pound a week should be easy enough to make. The owner had generously left behind the thousand layers, after all, and the oranges would soon be ripe enough to harvest ... and the apples. It was a home of their own.

Interested or bemused, even Grandfather Albert chipped in with the gift of a truck. Which has ever convinced me that in addition to being a swine, he was an astute observer of the human condition, often anticipating needs and moving solutions like obstacles into the paths of the needy ... in return for the satisfaction of seeing these solutions being tripped over. A power-hungry man, perhaps ... ? God knows, I'm only four: I've got a lot of living ahead of me.

The incident of the tobacco tin took place at what I knew as our first home, there, on the farm near the little bush hamlet of Parkerville. I have no earlier recollection than this. Nothing in my little life has been more marvelous, a greater revelation, or has exceeded in significance the incident of the tobacco tin. I was transfixed! Had I been older, I would have nodded my head to Moses as he struck the rock and said: "I know how you feel, mate" as the water gushed forth. But no-one told me about Moses until I was six. (When the teacher did deal with that subject, I remember wandering around the top paddock speculatively searching for burning bushes — disappointedly and without success, as I recall.)

Hereafter, I am able to relate my story as seen through my own eyes. This is a relief, as assuredly any auto-biographer similarly placed would testify.

* * * * *

'Ma! Ma! a letter! It's from Australia! Ma! I think it's from Harry!'

'Well what does it say then, Tommy lad?'

'Can I open it? It's addressed to you.'

'Is it son? Well, give it here then. From Australia, you say, is it?'

'It was brought by hand to the village. Mr Curnow at the butcher's had it first. Are you going to open it, Ma?'

'Yes, of course I am, in a minute, lad. Let me look at the thing, will you.'

‘Mr Curnow says a man brought it up from Falmouth the day before yesterday.’

‘Did he now? So what’s old Curnow doing holding on to it for so long, I’d like to know.’

‘Mr Curnow said he was waiting to see me pass by; but of course yesterday I didn’t go to Mr Sedges. There was work for me at the mine.’

‘Indeed there was and right proud I am of my little man for working there. You know what a shilling means to us now, don’t you son?’

‘Yes, Ma. But the letter! When are you going to open it?’

‘In a minute, I said. Just let me look at the thing, will you?’

‘Yes, Ma.’

‘See the stains on it! It has really come a long way, hasn’t it — and if you turn it over, see how the wax is cracked. From our Harry, you say?’

‘Ma!’

‘Oh, you open it and read it to your old Mum, Tommy. You know my eyes aren’t so good.’

‘Can I?’

‘But tell me first where’s it from in Australia. Is it from South Australia?’

‘I don’t know ... it’s from a place called Fremantle. I don’t know where that is. Mr Sedges might know. I’ll ask him tomorrow.’

‘You’re probably right, Tom: Mr Sedges is bound to know. Well, get on with it. What does it say?’

"Dear Ma and Belinda and Tom,

I am writing to let you know I am still alive and the journey was fine but very long.

I am not in South Australia. I am at Swan River Settlement.

Mister Fox is my employer. I am learning to be a produce merchant but I am not indentured. I can leave anytime. Soon I might go to South Australia. I hope you are all well. Keep going with your lessons Tom. Are you still working at the big house Belinda? Is Franny Shaddick married yet or is she still teasing Gilbert?

I love you all. There is some money for you at the Post Office. Pretty good writing for a mine lad, do you think? Mister Fox has been helping me.

Goodbye

from Harry Coates"

‘Don’t cry, Mum. Please!’

‘Come here, my little sweetheart. Sorry. It’s just so wonderful to hear that he’s safe ... and to hear you reading his letter like that. You are such a good lad. You know your old Ma can’t read but you didn’t say anything. One day, you’ll go off like Harry. And a good thing it will be for you. Lord knows what your poor mum will do then ... ’

‘Ma! Don’t cry. I’ll never go away.’

‘Won’t you, son? Then you’ll be the only man who doesn’t.’

‘Not every man goes away, Ma.’

‘Your Da, and then Harry ... you’ll go, son. Mark my words. Now, off to Mr Sedges with you. I’ve work to do.’

‘You’re not at the mine?’

‘Course I am, son. How else do you think we’ll live?’

‘Ma! What about the money Harry’s sent? You don’t have to ...’

‘I can still do my turn at the rock breaking. Not the big ones, any more; but I can swing a hammer still with the best of them when I’ve a mind to.’

‘Oh! Ma ... day’ll come when bal-maidens won’t be needed, Ma. Machines are coming, Ma.’

‘Run along with you, lad. Soft-hearted thing! We need my shillings still.’

CHAPTER Seven

In those early years I had a friend with the illustrious name of Jim James Thomas Todd. Jim and his father lived in a mud-brick house further down the creek. He had no Mum. Jim and his Dad had come from Victoria to avoid the infantile paralysis epidemic, so we were told. Jim was about eleven at the time. He went to school while his Dad made enough to keep them both by cutting mine prop timber from the surrounding bush land.

Below Jim's house was the waterfall, our favoured Indian territory where "Chief Sitting Bull" (Jim) had a teepee. From this structure emitted the cries of the occasional visiting brave or squaw as they involuntarily submitted to Jim's initiation rites. Outside the teepee was "The Leap", a gap in the rock wall through which the water rushed on and down "The Slide". It was a bum-skinning ride for the careless who missed The Leap and ended up on The Slide. Visitors thought that the only entry or escape from the teepee was over The Leap and Jim did nothing to enlighten them, talking them over The Leap to get in, only then pointing out the dangers subsequent to a missed footing.

Novice braves were admitted to the tribe by degree, depending on performance in the pissing trials. Hitting a jam tin at three feet was a minimum requirement, while any boy managing to topple the tin at five feet was given an immediate accolade and allowed to wear the Black Orpington tail-feather in his headband. Headbands were usually fashioned from reeds, on the spot. Boys who failed at three feet were given lessons.

Understandably, squaws did not do well in that sort of competition; but providing they were prepared to be painted all over with river mud, they were tolerated. And if they wouldn't be painted, they were, anyway. Jim was quite methodical in the management of squaws and kept their clothes until they had, to his satisfaction, washed all the mud off before they went home.

Jim was also notable because he wore sandals without socks apparently forever, judging by their smell. Many years on, I have forgotten the details of Jim's face, as memories do fade; but I can still smell him.

* * * * *

1886

“Fox and Coates”, “Coates and Fox”. Not as bad as a pair of horse-dealers I once met — “Pinchem and Crook”. But “Fox and Coates” sounds fair enough to me. Agnes, by the way,

has asked me to take her back home. She wants to die in Dorset, she says — at Sturminster, where I first met her. The prospect of going back to the Old Country doesn't cheer me, Harry, but it's what Agnes wants. She might make the journey. Doctor Hardwick is against it, of course, though Agnes says it's her life or death, not the doctor's.'

'Poor Agnes,' Harry confirmed. He had met no-one possessed of a less appealing personality than Fox's wife.

'Yes. Though some might find my words callous, having that stroke was the making of Agnes. I can only admit, and you'll remember, she had become a terrible, carping, mean-natured woman. All that changed, once she had learned to speak again and was able to get about.'

'The baby, too, helped her to recover.'

'Margaret's?'

'Of course. Will you take the child to England?'

'If needs be,' Cecil Fox sighed, 'If needs be, though I don't relish the prospect of being solely responsible for the girl, for one thing.'

'You mean Margaret ...?' It had never entered Harry's head before that Fox would leave Margaret behind.

'That slut can't keep herself!' Fox retorted heatedly.

The two men were in the barn, each with a foot on the rail of the horse stall. Old Ned had long since gone to his final rest. "New" Ned had taken his place and, sensing that today was Sunday, was regarding his human company without particular concern.

Harry, thinking it was time for him to know about Margaret and believing that he must surely know his one-time employer — now officially his partner — as well as he would be ever likely to, he decided to throw caution to the wind and talk about the strange girl of whom Fox rarely spoke.

The older man, his eyes staring fixedly, remained silent at first. Finally turning his head towards Harry and treating him to some distant regard for a few moments, Cecil Fox spoke. 'Yes, you should be told,' he began tiredly, taking Harry by surprise.

Harry had expected an outburst even though he personally had always been the object of the utmost respect in his dealings. Fox hesitated, as though forcing himself to go on. He used tones of seriousness Harry had never heard from him before.

'Margaret is Agnes's child. She, Agnes, was already pregnant when we married.'

'With your child, I suppose,' Harry assumed, aloud.

‘No!’ Fox exclaimed, forcibly. He was silent for some seconds, making no effort to conceal his annoyance with his listener. ‘Nothing is ever as it appears, Mr Coates,’ he said as jocularly as he could manage, recovering. Fox was trying hard to bring this conversation onto the lighter, less active, philosophical level he was accustomed to use. ‘As I was saying — Agnes was pregnant when we married but — and here’s the rub. We had been nibbling the sweets no more than most before we were wed. What red-blooded couple doesn’t do that? It was after the knot was tied that she, Agnes that is, confessed that she had been a naughty girl and succumbed to the charms of another — her cousin, of all people. We were on the boat by this time, heading for a new start in a new world, albeit no America, as you must surely have apprehended it to be by now.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Harry contributed, feeling that there was something to acknowledge but unsure of just what.

‘Nonsense. Besides, it doesn’t hurt any more: nothing does so much. We all get older. Pain loses some of its power in the old. The old have less to lose, I suspect.’ Cecil Fox looked away. ‘There,’ he said, preparatory to returning to his subject, ‘now it’s my turn to be sorry. I regret to say I took to the bottle. I could see no avenue of action open to me. I was caught in a classic situation. I loved Agnes, you see, and even though the child she was carrying belonged to another, I still wanted her. Can you understand that, Harry? What was I to do? On the boat there was one family of emigrants heading for New Zealand the long way round. The Harveys. They had a daughter of about twenty, a pretty, sparky little thing, full of mischief who, I flatter myself, took a fancy to me. One thing led to another as naturally as things do between girls and boys. For the moment, I felt that paper marriage vows such as those of Agnes and myself were ridiculous, considering events.

I had an affair with Lucy Harvey within the first month of the ship’s passage. It turned out to be one of those reactions we allow ourselves to be driven to in desperation or disappointment, from which we have to ride away for the rest of our lives.’

Harry waited in silence for Cecil Fox to continue. The two men stood quietly as Druids waiting for the sunrise, New Ned apprehensively shaking his head, as though even he sensed the tension in the air.

‘The girl fell ill at the Cape and disappeared overboard barely two weeks after we had resumed our journey. This followed me telling her that I could not leave Agnes for her and the baby. You see, Lucy was pregnant — or thought she was — too.’

Another still, quiet pause in Fox’s monologue proceeded to fill the barn, interrupted

again by New Ned who thought it appropriate to fill the void with a series of sneezes that brought a wry smile even to the late speaker's lips.

'You old sod, New Ned,' Fox managed — relieved, Harry thought: 'You've been eavesdropping!' he accused comically, before turning again to face Harry. 'Well, Margaret arrived. I couldn't look at her. I saw another child, the one that might have been — Lucy's and mine. Poor Agnes. She did so want me to love her child. That's all, Harry. That's all Agnes wanted, Harry For me to love her child. You know Margaret. It can't be difficult to imagine her as a little girl. Margaret was so beautiful, but I only ever saw in her the child who might have been in her place. I couldn't bring myself to have anything to do with her, to even recognize her existence. At every turn I took out my disappointment on her mother, as perhaps you noticed me doing. Agnes, being the child's mother, in a natural mother's way, defended the girl. We, that is, Agnes and I, over the years became estranged because of Margaret whom I still can't forgive for being in the house or for being so close to my wife. I can't forgive her for her being alive at all. Margaret has repaid my hate, Harry, in a perverse sort of way. She has repaid my neglect of her as a person by preserving for me the woman I most love in all the world — Agnes — and I still can't stand the girl, Harry! What am I to do? What am I to do? I can't bear the thought of being tied up in the company of Margaret with Agnes on board ship even though Agnes expects the girl to come with us. That's how much Agnes has changed, Harry. At one time she would never have dreamt that she and Margaret would go anywhere together in my company. Agnes seems to have forgotten everything of the past's unpleasantness. What am I to do?'

Fox broke off at this point, clearly his speech felled by emotion, a thing bailed up behind a wall of philosophic protection developed over the years since being besieged in his solitary keep. 'What if Agnes dies on the journey and I am then left alone with the girl?' the man resumed, restoring himself somewhat. 'I fear I would do her some violence. I might even kill her for what she has done to me and to my life.'

'Mrs Fox, I suppose, wasn't able to con... ? There were no other children? Your granddaughter, though must be ...' Harry began a second time, realizing too late that quite obviously the four-year old girl of whom he was so fond was, after all, no relation at all of Fox.

'You see?' was all Fox needed to say for Harry to understand his partner's dilemma.

The younger man became lost in thought. Suddenly brightening, he said authoritatively 'Mr Fox, you need to fall in love desperately and quickly with Margaret and with little

Catherine. Then, you won't be able to tear yourself away from either of them. You'll be quite sure you can't live without them. You could ... all four of you ... could go on the Cygnet as one whole family. You might even ... even thank your lucky stars about coming to your senses in time soon enough to miss becoming a lonely old man.'

'Mr Coates' Fox protested, after a minute of suspended time had followed Harry's attempt at a solution to Fox's problem, 'I would never have believed that the boy I rescued from a heaven-knows-what fate all those years ago would turn out to be capable of uttering such bloody fool rubbish!'

Harry accepted this criticism with equanimity, fully aware that if Cecil Fox loved Agnes first, then he was second in that man's affections.

'Then you have a better idea?'

'Not altogether. I was thinking of cancelling the trip, or of sending Agnes and Margaret with her child on ahead and never joining them later, as I might promise.'

'No good,' Harry quickly added to that only tentatively-put proposal. 'Mr Fox, that's no good. You'd still run the risk of becoming an bitter and lonely person.'

'We could carry on here, together, as we've done these past years, couldn't we, young Harry? We've proved ourselves to be a good team. The business is better now than it ever has been ... thanks mostly to your efforts, I'll admit ... '

'And disappoint Mrs Fox? But I can't,' Harry interposed.

'Hey, can't what?' Fox quickly countered.

'I can't carry on, Cecil.' Harry looked flustered.

Fox waited in silence for the younger man to continue.

'I've decided to go away ... '

'Go away!?! Go away where?'

'When you first told me that you might return to England, I set myself to thinking of what I might do. I thought I'd try my luck somewhere else. North, perhaps.'

'North?'

'Yes ... Halls Creek ... somewhere.'

Fox allowed his mouth to fall open with surprise. 'Halls Creek?' he echoed, slapping his thigh, incredulity creasing his usually placid features. 'But lad,' he laughingly began, 'What if there are no crows!?! What if all the blackbirds have been hit? And even if you do succeed in downing one with a gold nugget, what if the telegraph lines are not working? The Superintendent will never get your message!' Tears of amusement filled the old man's

eyes — which he wiped away with the sleeve of his coat.

Harry was relieved. At least the man was not shocked by his decision to leave Fremantle and seek his fortunes in the broader world or perhaps wildernesses that he'd heard described so variously as lying beyond the coastal plain of this vast land.

'I and who else doesn't know about that telegram which was meant to announce the discovery of gold, up there, which said "Picked up stone to throw at crow" — the one the sender was so excited about he missed saying that the rock had gold in it?. So ...?'

'You've shown no interest in ornithology up till this moment, Harry. Why now?' Cecil Fox insisted, his eyes narrowing, his shrewd mind alerted to another level of meaning in his young friend's announcement.

Dissemble as he might, Harry was aware that Fox, true to his name, couldn't ever be lured away from a scent, once that gentleman had got a whiff of it. The trick was to direct him onto false trails, to play for time, as Harry did now.

'Farming seems to have possibilities,' Harry offered up.

Fox laughed at this, too. 'I can see it now. Your apple trees overloaded with perching pigs, billy goats tripping over bridges and paddocks full of waving red glass slippers.'

Harry smiled. He knew Fox knew he was onto something.

'Let's call pax on this one, Cecil. It's what you are going to do about Margaret, and little Cathy that started all this. I'm leaving. That's all, at this stage. What you are going to do is what we have to settle.'

'Catherine?' Fox's tone ever softened when he uttered that name. He pretended a gruffness but failed to achieve it. 'Finding her father might be one solution,' Fox mumbled, looking steadily at Harry. Then, as if excusing the tacit inference he had made he said: 'You do seem to be wonderfully keen on the child, taking her with you on delivery rounds, teaching her to handle the reins ... though even an baby could convince New Ned to take a wrong turning. Where did you get that animal from? No, I think, young Harry, many less astute minds than mine, contemplating you two together, would lay the metaphorical finger of fatherhood upon ye. You realize what you'll do to that girl if you leave?'

Harry swallowed hard. Mention of the young one of course brought into focus a relationship he had with the child, a bond of love and trust he knew only too well he was proposing to deny, should he leave Fremantle without her. Yet, how else could he configure in his mind the future he proposed to pursue? Deep within himself he could already feel the ties of his devotion to the girl stretching with the minutes, the miles, of his separation from

the sight of her. But leave her he must. How could any young man striding out towards the future entertain the idea of such an encumbrance as the four year-old girl child would represent? Till now, he had refused to entertain the question of Catherine or of the possible effect upon her of his sudden desertion of her. 'She has her mother,' Harry attempted, defensively.

'For whatever use she may be,' scoffed Fox.

'Margaret has looked after Mrs Fox for you,' Harry persisted.

'And so she should: Agnes is her mother, after all.'

'You are an unforgiving man, Cecil.'

'Listen, Harry boy! Somebody sins against me and I must forgive them? Where's the logic in that?'

'The idea behind forgiving, Cecil, as you know very well, is a matter of insurance. You forgive in order that you'll be forgiven.' This, at least, was the essence of what Harry remembered from his Bible Christian Sunday School days.

'So who's going to forgive you, Harry Coates, if you leave that child behind? And have you forgiven the grasping shareholders of the mine you were trapped in? Have you forgiven the engineer who said: "Take out those pillars of rock holding up the roof because the tin in them is far too rich to leave behind"? Have you been able to forgive the mine owner for prematurely filling those I don't know how many plots in the cemetery with the young bodies of your mates, Harry Coates? Heh? Yes? Truly? So why are you sleeping in the hay loft then with a stinking horse for company? Didn't you move out of the house saying that you felt that it wasn't fair on Margaret sleeping in the room next to yours, you keeping her awake at nights with your nightmare screaming? Well?'

Harry had no answers for Fox. He knew that no matter who he forgave, there would be no following relief from the permanence of his memories of the dark horrors of the mine, just as he knew that with the decline of the sun each day, even in this innocuous climate in which he was now situated, there was no escape for him from the association of darkness and a dungeon-like damp world full of creeping, monstrous loneliness. The two men agreed a truce on the subject of forgiveness.

'I'm twenty-nine, Cecil. I've been in Fremantle for twelve years. Thanks to you, I've got some money put by. I also know our sort of business pretty well. So I'm far better off now than when I landed fresh off the boat from Plymouth. I never did get to South Australia, though from what I've heard, that doesn't matter very much. I'll leave for the

north, for a place called Onslow, first, when you leave for England,' Harry concluded, not unaware of a certain tremulousness within his resolve. Little Catherine's weeping face was at his mind. Was he, like another Shaddick, about to sentence her to a darkness similar to his own? Harry attempted to shrug off the silent questioner.

Cecil Fox had listened in a pleasantly relaxed fashion while resting on the tack rail, swinging his heels, his hands gripping the bar either side of him. He said nothing at the end of Harry's speech, though the young man, knowing the older as well as he did, could tell that there would be an utterance from the latter quite soon. When it came, Harry was surprised but not flabbergasted. He had been expecting some sort of alteration, some amendment to his plans to be suggested — but not this!

'I wasn't altogether straight with you, earlier, Harry. I should have said I'm determined not to take Margaret with Agnes and myself. I can't stand her. I can't forgive her. The girl is an abomination to me as you very well know. You also know as well as I do that you are the father of Catherine. Don't ask me how I know this. I just do. I am right, am I not? And don't start lying to me, not after all these years!'

There was in Fox's voice a note of anger Harry had never heard a whisper of in the twelve years he had known the man.

'So, since you haven't offered, I'm telling you! You take the slut with you! Were you to say so, I'd believe you if you said the whore caught you in a weak moment — but I know enough to realize that you didn't take up sleeping with Ned solely because of the racket you make at night. You wanted to get away from Margaret — but you left your move too late to stop Catherine coming. Am I right? It doesn't matter: Catherine looks too much like a Cornish piskie for you to deny it!' Fox chortled with brutal emphasis, adding more in his usual bantering tones. 'So you take the ... And see that nothing happens to the bairn.' Whereupon, Cecil Fox dismounted from the tack rail and stalked off into the yard, walking determinedly towards the Banksia tavern. Harry followed.

Harry and Cecil Fox had much to discuss in respect of the sale or closure of the business. As for Catherine and for Margaret ... Harry knew Fox's thinking on that subject was complete. The implications of his stand on the subject of Harry's responsibilities were clear. In a strange but comfortable way Harry felt a sense of relief that their "negotiations" had reached this point without any major rupture. Prospecting for gold, Harry's first choice of pursuit, might not any longer be an immediate option; but the abandonment of that idea, which less than an hour ago would have left him feeling bereft, resulted in a flood of relief

suffusing his being and lightening his step — stilled at once by a chill of dread that his conscience upon which he relied had allowed him to ever contemplate leaving his beloved Catherine.

CHAPTER Eight

In a way, it was Jim James Thomas Todd's father who brought matters to the first major crisis in my small life. Father's various attempts to succeed at something — anything — having come to nothing more than more bills, just enough money remained in the family vault to pay for licensing the BB Ford truck which Grandfather Albert had peculiarly donated to us. Snatching this last sum from the rib-cage of a failed idea, off we went to the local Roads Board to register our truck for the cartage of goods. Ron the Carrier had hit the road. And that didn't work, either. Peas! Grow them in between the rows of fruit trees and gain not only a quick cash crop but loads of lovely nitrogen that everything not animal or mineral craved so. Was the Journal of Agriculture to blame? Or did the idea simply spread by word of mouth? Blue-boilers or Greenfeast? Decisions, decisions! Greenfeast, the winners! Plough. Fertiliser? Fertiliser = money = cash = more bird-sacrifices. (We were poultry farmers, as well.) A further hundred anxious-looking layers sent to market by train were converted into seed and sowing commenced. In but a few short months small heads appeared among the rows — worse than twenty-eights, their owners descended upon the ripening pods with all the voracious-ness of the Mongolian hordes. As paid pea-pickers we were gloriously well-fed failures. And since Father's pea-growing plans had omitted the rather elementary necessity of harvest, he snatched victory from the jaws of defeat by declaiming that, as he ploughed in the crop, he had always intended the project's purpose to be that of green-manuring, anyway.

Then Jim's Dad sent a message: three tons of mine props out of the bush and loaded into a rail-wagon for Kalgoorlie. Were Ron and son interested in the job? Yes: we were.

This day, beautiful. Sunlight struck the green leaves and turned their edges gold. In the BB Ford, it was warm. For once the engine sounded happy and the three of us — Father, Eveline and me were happy, too — that is, until we approached the village store, just before the railway crossing, when Father stopped the truck and asked me to get out. The idea was that I should pick up the daily newspaper and meet up with him and with my sister Eveline in the railway yards perhaps three hundred yards along the track from the crossing. Vehicle traffic entering the railway loading area was required to go up over the crossing near the store and then proceed along a road parallel to the line to where a rake of wagons rested on the loop. That I should be the one to get the paper seemed to me unjust: I, who for a year now had been assistant encouragement to the BB Ford, relegated

to paper boy! Not from any sense of industrial justice but purely to cut short my performance, Father instructed Eveline to do the job for the sake of amicable work relations.

Father, meanwhile, was off on another of his externalized interior monologues. No Mr Bloom, Father still seemed to enjoy a certain companionship with himself that one not aware of his habits might find exclusive. Did BB Ford get itself into gear? Loaded high with mine timber, the vehicle groaned its way towards the railway crossing. I sat, as usual, peering out over the dash board, my feet resting on the lid of the toolbox that occupied a good deal of the cabin floor space. I could see to my left the sparkling sun in an azure sky and much the same through the windscreen. The approach to the crossing was via an earthen ramp built up to the level of the railway track. I could see Father to my right, and until BB Ford returned to level ground, this would be the extent of my view.

What happened next was notable for its blackness and its surprise. I remember a horrible noise, but I could never say when it began. I know I asked rather stupidly: "What happened?" sometime while the blackness still persisted. But I didn't feel anything — then.

It was from the ambulance window that I last saw BB Ford standing battered and torn beside the railway track, in a ditch where the diesel railcar had projected him. There was no back in the cab: it had been ripped open. His tyres were flat; his load had vanished. Father, I learned, had been treated at the cottage hospital for a bruised knee and was now on his way home, while I had a broken arm and a crushed finger-tip and accompanied by Mother, was on my way to the children's hospital in the city. What a day that was! Two things I wonder about: what happened to that newspaper Eveline went to buy and just where was Father when he drove BB Ford into the path of the oncoming train? Eveline might know the answer to the first; but asking the second question could now only generate a mythology

* * * * *

'I saw that Harry Coates again today, Aunt Gemima,' Rosa said carefully, sitting in the window seat with her back to the light, her patchwork upon her knee, the cloth concealing one of her hands, the other poised with needle held high as she tensioned the thread to form her latest stitch.

'Harry, dear? Do I know this Harry?' called her aunt through the open door of the dining hall, the rather insignificant space between the lower stairs and the "salon" in which

Rosa was ensconced. In the dining hall where guests gathered to eat the sumptuous fare for which Virginia House was noted. Gemima, the senior partner in this fine guest house, was preparing the tables for the evening meal.

‘You are sure you would not rather I did that, Auntie?’ Rosa called, by way of reply.

‘No, dear. I’m quite capable, still. Besides, it’s the only exercise I seem to get, these days,’ Mrs Capstock was heard to advise. ‘You were saying ... about this Harry person whom you met?’

‘No, not “met”, Aunt. I just saw him. He was driving that wagon again. Had a little girl with him this time. I must say she was a pretty little thing. I wondered if she might be his daughter,’ Rosa called through, letting her voice trail off as she speculated with feigned disinterest.

‘Do you mean Harry Coates, Rosa — that nice young Cornishman you spoke of before who was with us on the boat?’ Mrs Capstock persisted, however.

‘Yes, that’s him.’

‘The one who was in love with you?’

Had her aunt been present, she would have seen Rosa’s colour rise. Today was certainly not the first time Rosa had seen Harry Coates about the town. Indeed, more than once she had seen him from this very window walking in the street. But that was years ago. For a time she had entertained the idea of creating a “chance” meeting with him, but was unsure, both of herself and of him. Rosa remembered how she had resolved to follow her inclination the next Sunday afternoon should he pass. But Harry Coates never came again. Suddenly, his appearances in her street ceased and, except for distant glimpses of him as he trundled along the High Street in that wagon he drove, Rosa had neither seen him nor heard of the man since.

Rosa shrugged then with a toss of her still-lustrous dark hair, turning her attention again to her needlework. What did it matter? Did she really think she could have made a life with a simple delivery man even if, in the end, he had wanted her? And at thirty three years of age, what were her chances now of marriage and family? Who was there for her in the colony, anyway, for a woman of independent mind and imagination, such as herself to become tied to? Far better to remain here, in the company of her aunt. And when the time came for Aunt Gemima to cease her management of Virginia House, what valid reason did she have not to take up Mrs Capstock’s declared offer of the business in its entirety?

The front door slammed shut; a parasol rattled into the umbrella stand. Suddenly, the entrance hall resounded to a hurricane, which was, to the unaccustomed ear on this bright placid September afternoon as the sun hung over the harbour looking something like a giant yellow chrysanthemum in the cooling sea-borne air, an extraordinary event. To Mrs Capstock and her niece, the sounds simply denoted the return to Virginia House of their vivacious, utterly hedonistic one-time ward, Charlotte Sommers.

Charlotte, the little girl whom Mrs Capstock agreed to “mind” for a day or two when the child was eleven, had still not been called for; in the interim had grown into one of the town’s outstanding beauties, was now twenty-three years of age and fulfilling the position of a third partner in the thriving business Virginia House represented. Gemima sometimes argued with herself as to whether she should have told the girl when, some month or so after Captain Sommers went missing, the girl’s father wrote to her begging to be excused, saying that he had no intention of abandoning the child; that he would send for her just as soon as “suitable quarters” for his daughter could be arranged on the farming property he had purchased and that he would be most grateful if Charlotte might remain under Gemima’s protection until he again contacted her. Sommers included a banker’s draft in his letter “to defray any expense Charlotte’s keeping may have incurred”. Gemima had been in two minds as to whether she should tell Charlotte about the Captain’s letter, had deferred her decision on the matter and had continued to do so, finally thanking her own dilatoriness when no further word — or money — was received from the man. Years would go by before Gemima Capstock would hear from or of Captain Sommers, though Charlotte continued to speak of her father often, sorrowfully, but never reproachfully.

‘Aunty Gem, Aunty Gem! Guess what? I saw Harry Coates, today!’

Rosa felt her heart leap involuntarily and at once shut her ears as best she could lest further information on that subject should assail them.

‘Harry is off to ... to somewhere like Beverley, I think!’

Trust Charlotte to skim over such an important detail, Rosa could not prevent herself from thinking. She busily threaded another cotton, intending to apply herself vigorously to her sewing. What came next, though, made her pause mid-stitch as though suddenly petrified.

‘He had a little girl with him — I forget her name. He did say — but the spitting image of him. Could be his daughter. Harry’s leaving the produce business and is going farming!’

‘Harry Coates married? I don’t believe it! Besides, should you really be seen talking to a delivery man in the street?’

‘Aunty Gem! It’s Sunday, remember? Harry wasn’t driving his wagon, today. He was out walking the Town. He had taken the little girl down to the quays to see the ships. He looked really good. In his Sunday best. Even that church visitor Reverend Josh Samuels who took the service this morning didn’t look better. I saw him, too. I must tell Rosa! Where is she?’

In the salon, Rosa hurriedly arrested her thoughts and returned them almost guiltily to the patchwork lying on her lap. She often envied Charlotte her lack of self-consciousness, her being able to ignore what she, Rosa, understood as social proprieties; for the facility Charlotte had of talking to men as though they were simply equal human beings, not the he-goats she was secretly terrified of.

Charlotte burst into the placid atmosphere of the salon and threw its serenity out the window. ‘Harry sends his regards to you, Ros!’ the younger girl enthused, bending to place her hands on Rosa’s shoulders before kissing her on the forehead — Charlotte’s usual form of greeting. Still slight of stature, girlish, she swept aside Rosa’s sewing in order to take its place. Charlotte often sat in Rosa’s lap, her arms about the other’s neck and chatted away as she had done, ever since she had settled into Aunt Gemima’s household.

‘I do wish he’d take me with him.’ Charlotte pouted.

‘Who?’ Rosa exclaimed, in shocked attention.

‘Why, Harry, of course.’

‘Charlotte!’ Rosa pushed the girl away from her. Charlotte jumped to her feet; turned to face Rosa. ‘Why shouldn’t he? I’ve known Harry for years and years. He’s a good man. I know he is. I’ve spoken to him often on the street ... ’

‘Have you now, young lady,’ Rosa interrupted, smiling, adopting a sham, shocked tone.

‘And he always asks after you, so don’t get high and mighty with me. He’d take you with him, if you asked,’ Charlotte added, intrigued by her own thought. ‘You can’t have him, though,’ she continued dreamily. ‘I want him.’

Rosa was so overawed by the girl’s first words that for a moment she failed to register Charlotte’s declaration.

Taking Rosa’s silence as a delay to be filled with more information, Charlotte commenced to supply it. ‘I’ve always loved Harry — since the Dorian when he used to

make eyes at you — mostly when you were not looking at him — and you wouldn't help him by even speaking to him. I decided then that when I grew up I'd more than help him... '

Rosa's confusion threatened to overpower her tenuously-holding composure. Was it true? Did she really hinder Harry's expression of feeling for her in this way? Being cruelly honest with herself, she admitted that she probably had. She and Aunt Gemima had been on the experience-of-a-lifetime trip to an unknown land. A man — Harry — would have been an intrusion, a complication in hers and her Aunt's relationship. Then, life had been sweet, exciting and needed nothing more to sustain her buoyant spirits. Only lately, as the years had begun to slip away and her own destination in life had begun to resolve itself, then had she truly begun to see her present life's horizons and to realize that what she saw was not altogether pleasing. Then again, Rosa argued against her yet bubbling inner urges, did Harry represent the future for which she yearned: a husband, as a companion for the rest of her life ... and children? The blush this thought brought to her cheeks was misinterpreted by her young friend whose relationship with her was as much that of a sister.

'I do, Rosa,' Charlotte protested. 'Think what you like!'

'I'm sorry ... you do ... do what, my lovely Charlotte?'

'I'm going to have him.' Charlotte insisted indignantly.

Rosa laughed. 'I assume it is Harry Coates you are speaking of? But didn't I hear you say that he had a daughter? Doesn't that tell you something, Charlie?' Rosa blurted out, addressing Charlotte using the child's name Aunt Gemima had favoured when the girl was much younger.

'I see. You are not taking me seriously, are you Rosa? Contrary to what you may think, I am an adult now,' Charlotte responded, very seriously. 'I don't care if Harry Coates has a whole string of children and a harem of ... of fifty two ... I still want to be with him!' Tears began to mark her distress.

Rosa stood, wrapped Charlotte in her embrace and whispered to her words of comfort. Now, Rosa understood, was not the time to pursue solutions to her puzzlement, the one thought most obdurately impinging on her mind being how it was that Charlotte should know Harry Coates so well and how was it that the pair had kept in touch all these years without either she or, as far as she was aware, her Aunt Gemima knowing anything about it.

'Aunt Gemima!' Rosa suddenly exclaimed to no-one. It was Rosa's turn to entertain a rogue petulance.

The street bell rang. Aunt Gemima had retired upstairs by this time where, having made her preparations for the evening diners, she would be taking her “nap” as these days she always insisted upon, late, between five and six in the evening.

Charlotte was gloomily occupying the window seat at this moment, unwontedly quiet, annoyed and dissatisfied with this latest turn in her life but not in the least bit introspective about its particulars.

Rosa, on the other hand on hearing the bell felt flustered, being thus torn from her present mood of inner-self examination. She smoothed her skirt with a certain appearance of distraction, her hands flying to her hair to assure herself that nothing of the stress in her occasioned by recent events was evident in the lay of her curls then satisfied, she proceeded to the entrance hall just as the proposing caller pressed the brass button of the bell again.

‘G ... Good evening. Joshua Samuels,’ said the face of the man at the door, from whose head a smart grey, black-banded hat was lifted by the most delicate hand in the Colony.

Rosa admitted later that she must have just stared at the man.

‘I am in search of accommodation. I am recommended to you by the Bishop of New South Wales. You have vacancies?’

That credential he quoted was a white lie of his. As far as he knew, the Bishop in question, if such a personage existed, had never been to Western Australia. The untruth had sprung into his mind as, once his eyes had fallen upon Rosa, he admitted later, ‘no earth there seemed to be’ and thus, no God could exist on it, only angels or, more specifically, the one angel framed by the doorway.

Gemima saw how smitten with each other their new lodger and Rosa were and, ever practical, weighed the implications their infatuation with each other might have for Virginia House.

Had Joshua Samuels been a tradesman, she realized, it was unlikely the two would have met. The clientele of Virginia House was above that sort of person. There again, had Rosa been so inclined, these past ten years, the girl could have had the pick of a string of professional men — public servants, engineers, doctors, army officers, sea captains, the absolute cream of so many young men of good standing — who had used the guest house either as a first haven of rest on landing, or as a point of departure for other ports in the world. Rosa, then, had floated, serenely unaffected, on a veritable sea of compliments, as though never believing that the honeyed words her fine face and figure caused to flow to

her from so many mouths were any more than vacuous flatteries uttered for the sake of amusement. It had taken a Reverend to move her; and because of his calling, Aunt Gemima felt it was not likely, quite unlikely in point of fact, that the Reverend Samuels was one to lightly play the flirtation game. His intention towards Rosa could only be serious.

Gemima Capstock was not worried. She knew it would be foolish to delude herself that Charlotte would take Rosa's place, when and if her niece married. But the old lady liked to be advanced in her anticipations. Charlotte would never be the reliable helper. Charlotte, besides, was not really bound to her in filial affection; nor would it be fair to expect a devotion to her guardian such as Rosa had shown all this time. No: at sixty years of age, with her original capital increased so comfortably over the years and she being in good health still, there was, Gemima felt sure, many things left to interest her in this fledgling settlement. Perth she was barely familiar with. Trips up the river to that new city were about the extent of her knowledge of Western Australia. Gemima had sometimes wondered about what lay beyond the hills to the east. And the north: what of that? She was already enthusiastically picturing herself being in a state of care-free retirement from the necessitously constricting life she was leading.

All reveries are made to be broken into, just as day-dreams are plundered in childhood by the impositions of growth. At Virginia House dinner was about to be served. Never yet had her guests dined alone, without their homely landlady. Gemima descended the stairs to the accompaniment of the dinner-gong and made a perfectly timed entry, as usual.

CHAPTER Nine

I returned to school in triumph. I was the awesome one who had been driven into the path of an on-coming diesel railcar and had miraculously survived! Dorothy was very tender to me, insisting upon us sitting out the rougher games in the village hall, the night we had the school concert. The earnestness of her six-year old eyes has never been forgotten. But the truck was gone, the Railways people were billing Father for forty-five pounds to cover the damage to their lovely train set and Mother had a tentative eye on pastures new.

By the time our Uncle George (Mother's brother) died in 1940 after more than twenty years of private battles with trench feet and the effects of mustard gas, war had been declared again! A ray of hope shone through the crack under Father's door, bearing with it the prospect of a JOB that paid MONEY! Mother was sceptical: Father was thirty-eight. She was right: there were no jobs for thirty-eight year olds — not even in the armed services. By 1941, there were jobs for thirty-nine year olds, even in the Air Force. Aircraftman Ron stood five feet eight inches in his blues almost immediately thereafter, his primary sacrifice an initial mustering of "Service Policeman" — the best-kept secret of our war.

* * * * *

Bush flowers in Spring gushed into bloom as though sped on their course by some pre-knowledge of the rigorous summer lying ahead. The foreign blossoms that were enshrined in the culture of an irrelevant society brought and cultivated here strove with no less fervour to survive than did their native counterparts. Silly apple trees persisted in carrying their fruits through the blazing heat of summer; women, in the same heat, wore clothing designed to defend proprieties having no application in this land and men dressed on Sundays in suitings memorializing the worst elements of their expatriate beginnings.

Sure of itself, adapted to its geographical location, accepting of its place in the evolutionary scheme of things, the land reposed in the eye of the sun and bore the white man's importunings with unheeding, aloof composure while insisting upon its supremacy.

Some as yet amorphous, almost ominous concept of the country's breadth, of its inheritance, seemed to be forming in Harry's mind as the steam locomotive drawing the carriage in which he sat struggled with the gradient imposed upon it. He was not sure if what seemed to impinge upon his consciousness was a sense of threat, a foreboding, an idea of transgression or illicit intrusion, such as one might feel on entering another man's

property without warrant. Yet, compared to even the relatively sparse outlying areas of England such as this one-time Cornishman had known, this half of the vast island white men had called Australia, this new, oldest of earths; uninhabited, under-explored, even yet undeveloped, stood as good as vacant awaiting, so they said, only the imposition upon it of a civilizing order.

This was Harry's second-ever trip on a railway train. The unaccustomed speed at which the scenery of granite-capped hills, of sometimes dry water-courses and forests passed before his eyes was in itself something of a marvel. The future, the unknown, that was looming into thought whenever his interest in the landscape waned was subsumed into dreams and dwelt in his mind along with the past.

Opposite the man, on the other of the two hard, leather-covered straight-backed bench seats their compartment contained, the woman, Margaret, sat staring fixedly at the floor. Beside Harry, her hand in his, the child chattered away, oblivious of the reflections of mood adults might semaphore to the world, simply happy, her button-up shoes bouncing up and down in time with the rhythmic clanking of the wheels.

'When will we get there, Harry?' asked the child.

Harry wasn't sure. 'Ooh,' he replied, 'a long time yet.'

Little Catherine looked steadily at him for a few seconds. 'You don't know, do you, Harry!' she accused, laughing.

Harry hauled her onto his lap, tickling her till she squealed, 'I most certainly do, young Miss,' he growled.

A mock fight followed, each time he insisted that he knew the exact time of their arrival, she denying it and setting off another round of noisy laughter with each new bout of the contest.

Margaret, unmoved, seeming not to care, remained in her former position, head down, silent, her only motion being that induced by the train's movement over the bumpy track.

With that carelessness lost to most adults by the conventions of their upbringing, the child, tiring of the game she had engaged Harry in, climbed from his lap onto the seat beside him and prostrated herself there. With his thigh for a pillow, Catherine was soon sleeping soundly.

Harry looked across the carriage at Margaret. The woman never spoke to him, addressing him always through the child. 'Ask him this,' or 'Tell him that' she would say.

She and Catherine could talk together quite pleasantly — he had often come in upon their conversations but as soon as he appeared, the woman would fall silent.

Exasperated, one day the child had stood before him and stamping her little foot had exclaimed angrily ‘Why won’t you talk to Mummy, Harry?’ What was the use, he thought, of trying to explain even an apocryphal version of his and Margaret’s relationship to Catherine? That day, he had been forced to shrug his shoulders in reply and walk away. Neither he nor Margaret had exchanged a spare word after that day when, Margaret’s pregnancy now apparent to all, she had attempted to gain Harry’s admission of fatherhood and to require him to ‘make an honest woman’ of her. Harry had maintained that the girl had brought her condition upon herself; had coarsely countered her claim that it had been within his power to resist his natural urges by quoting an adage brought to this new land early: “You know what to expect if you go into the bull’s pen.” To which she replied with a snarl ‘Some bull! One shot and he’s shot!’ Margaret had screamed at him, referring, Harry knew well, to the fact that since their first encounter on the floor of the loft, he had not shown her the slightest sexual attention.

As the country through which the train was passing slowly became monotonous for him, Harry found himself thinking of the circumstances which had brought him into this present relationship with first the mother and subsequently with the child.

Years ago, now, not long after he had been taken in by Cecil Fox, the man he counted as the best friend of his life, Harry began to be worried by recurrent nightmares. For nights on end, he would wake up screaming, the heavy bedcovers, he would think, suffocating him, their weight crushing his chest, with the feeling that his head was about to burst under the pressure of the tons of rock bearing down upon it.

Margaret, sleeping in the room next to his, would look at him enquiringly each morning as though to know if he was all right. She had begun to talk to him — just a few words — in those days. Then, Harry became worried that first, she was privy to his terror and then, that he was keeping her awake with the noise he was making. Fox never remarked on his out-crying, so Harry assumed that mercifully his employer and his wife were not affected by it. The near-presence of the girl, however, created a waking anxiety in Harry’s mind which eventually drove him out of the house. It was then that he set up a portion of the hay loft as his sleeping quarters. Old Ned — he was alive, then — was a perfect gentleman about it, didn’t seem to care what went on above his head in the middle of the night and

appeared as though he would be able to sleep through the end of the world, should that event overtake him.

Harry had found his new sleeping arrangements recuperative. His mind seemed easier. His dreams became natural. He slept normally and with the soundness of his youth.

Margaret, after that first occasion when he had detected her in his “bedroom” spying on his bath-time below, often watched him “secretly”, or stood barring his movement in some narrow alley-way between stacked bags of produce. She was often at the harness rail as he prepared Ned for the day’s work, on such occasions making it impossible for him not to come in contact with her through touch. And when he did pass, she would thrust out her breasts or her thighs, sensuously rubbing herself against whatever part of his body she could reach. He knew well enough what was going on in her mind. He had seen it all before in the mines. No secrets had existed there, nor did either girl or boy have to spell out their needs with any such explicitness as did Margaret. He knew she needed a man, as well as she did herself. Nothing then, he remembered, would have induced him to accept Margaret as a substitute for Rosa.

As Margaret’s pregnancy became obvious, Harry withdrew even further from the girl and she, her needs now less physical, began openly to mock him, ostentatiously drawing aside from him as they passed, curling her lip should she imagine at any time Harry was looking at her. The girl’s behaviour then suited Harry well, and so their relationship continued for months after Catherine’s birth.

Then, one night, she came to him again in the darkness of the hay loft — and left well before the first glimmer of the dawn. Thereafter, the girl’s day-time attitude towards him was one of ever-maintained passivity. During the day and every day, Margaret ignored Harry almost completely, almost successfully.

Margaret still climbed into his bed in the dead of night periodically, but left it always before the sun rose. He had never been able to look at her to share with her those ecstatic moments. He had never wanted to. All he knew of her in the night was her touch, the scent of her body and the soft moaning sounds induced in her by their joining — which she always led. In daylight, it was as though she had never come to him; as though he were almost a stranger.

If anything, he was the one most to blame, he thought now as he looked at her. It was his fault, through his remaining where she was. He should have taken himself away, left Fox, tried his hand at anything. He could have taken the first opportunity and gone far, far

away. Instead, in his conceit, in his own self-preoccupation, especially with his former life, he stayed where Margaret could reach him, believing that his strength of will was greater than hers — ever confident that her instinctive cunning was not equal to his belief in his own intellectual power of self-control. There had been plenty of warning signs, Harry now realized, looking back. And in part, hadn't he brought much of it on himself? Hadn't he tried to have the girl take him into her confidence, when Agnes Fox took ill? Wasn't his action of treating the girl familiarly likely to have aroused expectations in her? Of course! He had been a fool! Harry looked at Margaret with unspoken compassion — and cursed himself. It was Fox who had been responsible for awakening in Harry his awareness of the inner self and the strength it could provide in times of stress. But it was Harry himself who had chosen to put this new-found, barely-understood asset to the test, in the way he did.

Fox knew nothing — so Harry thought at the time — of Margaret's imposition upon his young protege. Her pregnancy, so Fox said, was her affair. That it had arisen out of wedlock was simply, to him, the inevitable outcome of her own fathering.

What did all this matter, now, anyway? Harry looked at the sleeping form of the child. Had he needed confirmation that the "bellows had been put on his table" and that his luck did run out, there it was in the form of young Catherine who, if unfairly conceived, in the performance was his major delight. Harry smiled ruefully as once before he remembered he had smiled in this way, deep in the solitary depths of the Wheal Daisy. But when he looked at Margaret he felt only despair and disappointment that despite the pathos and sympathy his knowledge of her circumstances generated within him he could not love her. He could only think of the pervasive resentment aroused in him by her intervention in his plans ... and for her bearing witness to his own human frailty.

'Mummy! A station, Mummy!' Catherine was calling in her high, child's voice, at once trying to shake her mother awake and look out of the carriage window at the same time.

With great, tired huffings, in a cloud of steam and shuddering of brake-shoed wheels, the engine hauling the several carriages of the Perth-to-Northam all-stops mixed service seemed to sink on its rails and lie gasping for breath at Childow's Well, a major watering place, thirty-odd miles from its point of departure.

Harry, with his strangely acquired family, was bound for Sapphire Valley, a few miles beyond the well-established town of Northam. An agent at the Port had recruited him as a likely farm-worker and it was Harry's intention to spend a year in that capacity, learning as

much as he could, before perhaps pushing on, further into that area deemed by the authorities to be suitable for grain and grazing, eastwards. He had left most of his money with merchants in Fremantle, men whom he had come to know and trust in his dealings with them on behalf of Fox at first, then with Fox and himself.

When Fox sold the produce business he had insisted on splitting the profits from the sale equally firstly because Cecil saw himself as a father to the young man, and secondly as an expression of his relief and gratitude that the young ex-Cornishman was taking from his orbit the girl, Margaret, whose presence he had for years so much resented. Harry thus had suddenly become a man of reasonable means and with pride had been able to send a whole fifty pounds home. The money, he said, was to be divided between Belinda and Thomas. Harry's Ma had passed away several years previously, three months earlier than when the news reached him, though his tears then were not lessened by that fact.

Harry had waited at the Port until he had seen Cecil Fox and his invalid wife safely aboard a steamer bound for Liverpool, then offered Margaret his company on the basis that, publicly at least, she should be known as his wife, Mrs Coates. Margaret communicated her acceptance of the arrangement by nodding her head once. Harry knew he was relieved by it. Anything which might have separated him from the child would have been unbearable. His abandoned plans to join the goldrush to Hall's Creek in the far north caused him no regret and he was looking forward to the next year with enthusiasm. Since none of his family remained in the that County, he no longer entertained the prospect of returning to Cornwall and had determined that this unfamiliar land about which he had so far learned almost nothing would be his permanent home.

Harry thought that one day, when he was settled again, perhaps his brother Tommy might be persuaded to visit. Belinda's marriage to Tommy's old tutor, Mr Sedges was surprise news. Harry wished he knew all the circumstances that had led the girl to take that step. Some funny things had gone on at home since he had left it.

Meanwhile, after both passengers and locomotive had been refreshed at Chidlow's Well, all prepared to resume their journey. It was nightfall by the time Margaret, Catherine and Harry reached the inland township of Northam. Here, the railway line ended at the western boundary of the settlement at a station opened barely weeks before the newcomers' arrival. An obliging employee of the Avon Bridge Hotel then took them to that establishment where they were provided with a meal and a room for the night — a dry-smelling dusty upper-floor compartment with a long sash window glazed with hand-rolled

glass that gave a distorted view of the hotel's companion buildings across the wide intervening rough-graded road.

There was a wash basin and ewer of water in the room supported on a stained wooden stand with blue mock-Delft tiles, a high double bed, a box-like wardrobe and a chest of drawers supporting a wood-framed mirror. A large, deep and shabby upholstered chair stood beneath the window. There was no covering on the floorboards which were of American pine that complained whenever they were walked upon.

The room once engaged, Harry brought up the hand luggage then kissed the child good night and returned to the ground-floor public bar where he ordered beer. A tentative trio of lamps illuminated the room. Barely had Harry settled himself on a stool close to the bar, from which point he could survey most of the room through the bar mirror behind when the barman called 'Time'.

A stroll along the town's main thoroughfare — a single street which ran parallel to a rather diminished river named the Avon — was a solitary sortie in the late evening, and one which Harry was to discover, barely changed when hand in hand with Catherine, early next morning, he repeated the walk. Human voices, the yapping of dogs and the snufflings of yarded horses he heard; but hardly another human was stirring. On reaching The Farmers' Home hotel, even that darkened at this hour, reluctantly almost Harry retraced his steps.

Catherine lay beside her mother. In the dim light of the room Harry stood beside the bed, looking down upon the child. He gently stroked her tousled hair. His heart seemed to melt. His life, he felt, and all he had suffered so far was worthwhile after all. In response to his mood of almost spiritual gentleness the little girl contrastively whispered to him in quiet, dramatic tones: 'Mummy's been crying!'

'Go to sleep, Catherine,' Harry mumbled in reply as again the cold hand of a reality from which he had no escape reasserted its grip upon him. 'Go to sleep, little one,' he soothed and hoped the catch in his throat might be overlooked. The easy-chair would be his bed, tonight.

CHAPTER Ten

Among what lies deep within our psyche today there is an understanding we owe to the Japanese who, by threatening to blow us all to bits introduced to our culture another meaning of the word "evacuation". Bowels and Dunkirk were already part of the semiotic. Now, we youngsters were to experience its effects. Eveline and I were to be evacuated, too.

Whatever negotiations preceded his arrival I know not. I came home from play one evening to find a strange man sitting in our kitchen — a smiling man who looked like Father — with Eveline on his knee. 'You remember Uncle Bevan, don't you?' were my instructions.

For someone who had experienced and coped with several other odd situations to date, Uncle Bevan seemed pretty easy for me to cope with. Why I should have made the mental comparison with some other strangers I had met must have been for the purposes of self-preservation.

'Uncle Bevan has offered to take you and Eveline down to Whitewood. It's all for the best. I told you about the bombing. You'll be safe at Whitewood, away from the Japanese. After tea we'll pack your cases.'

Uncle Bevan, as I came to think about it, did look vaguely familiar. I seemed to remember his visiting us at our farm; but it must have been a long time ago. By now we as a family were living in the suburbs, sharing a house with a friend of Mother's, while A/C Ron rode off on his bicycle each day to perform his duty at the Air Force HQ in the city. Big sister Daphne was away doing her secondary schooling at New Norcia.

We arrived at Whitewood towards evening and were met at the station by a young man purporting to be my cousin. Uncle, Eveline and myself squashed into the cab of an International utility and were driven the two miles out to Grandfather's farm. Uncle, I later learned, had bought the property from Grandfather's estate — the Grandfather Albert, who, through being caught in a bushfire while helping Father burn off on our farm, had died of burns.

The light was fading as we drew up at the weatherboard and iron bungalow surrounded by a garden enclosed with six-foot high chook netting. The area immediately within the gate at which the vehicle stopped was used for growing vegetables and, as the International slowed to a halt, I caught sight of an elderly lady bent over, her torso horizontal to the ground, tugging out carrots which she threw onto a hessian bag beside her.

Auntie Mona's dentures fill my first impression of our next "home". As she turned her head towards us at our approach, her face was suffused by a magnificent smile, a smile that included the best display of teeth one could ever wish for. My heart warmed to this greeting, even though the lady was a complete stranger to me. Then she stood up. The expression on her face vanished. All that was left was another blank. What I had mistakenly read to be the warmth of human kindness with which I, in a moment, had already filled a future heaven on earth with turned out to be nothing more than a grimace. Auntie Mona, I was to learn, was a renowned grimacer: I was not the first to be fooled thus.

* * * * *

1889

Eight years old was a quite suitable age at which to be a bridesmaid, Catherine had declared. It was really a question, to which Mrs Capstock was expected to reply affirmatively.

‘But do I have to wear this silly dress?’ the child opined. ‘Will I be able to take it off after the wedding?’ she asked, the thought obviously brightening the prospect of the event.

‘I suppose so, dear. I can’t imagine that you’ll have to wear your bridesmaid’s dress for ever after!’ Mrs Capstock laughed.

‘No, Aunty Gem — I mean when we go to the re ... go to the party afterwards?’

‘Oh! no. I don’t think so, dear, Only the bride and groom do that — change their clothes, that is,’ Aunt Gemima replied, with befitting seriousness.

‘Will there be a man there taking pictures of us?’

‘Of course. And you’ll have to stand very still, as we all will, when he tells us,’ responded the little girl’s adopted aunt.

‘I wish it was all over, Aunty Gem, and there was just me, you, Harry and Charlotte all together,’ Catherine whimpered, her earlier mood suddenly deserting her to the extent that she felt driven to fling herself at and seek the comfort of the old lady’s voluminous skirt, to which the child desperately attached herself.

Mrs Capstock embraced the little waif-like creature dressed in shirt, bib and brace overalls and the little, stout, replica working boots Harry had had made specially for her. Something poignant was knocking at the door of the old lady’s heart, a reminiscence that she could not immediately recognize though she knew that to admit it would be a legitimate course of action. In another place at another time ... of course! Charlotte Sommers! Had she

not been embraced in just such a mood by that little girl, all those years ago? Gemima caught her breath — and just a little tear in time, before continuing:

‘The wedding will be lovely, I’m sure, Catherine. And you will look beautiful, too,’ Gemima found herself saying, amused in an ironical sense. For how many years had she wanted a child of her own? And here she was playing grandmother again. First, Charlotte, and now, this dear little thing. It was like reading just the last half of a book, like being given the second slice of roast mutton without any of the gravy. Mrs Capstock laughed again not at the child, but at the image of herself which had involuntarily appeared in her consciousness. There she was, a steam engine full of strength and bluster at first, now wasting her head for want of carriages to pull. She looked down at the little girl, the light of a resolution in her eyes, placed her hands under the child’s arms and lifted her up then pressed her to her bosom and kissed away the tears.

Catherine responded to this treatment of her in just the way Harry, had he been there, would have expected of her.

Still in arms, the child pulled back from Mrs Capstock’s embrace, looked puzzled momentarily then said wonderingly: ‘You smell assalootley lovely, Aunty Gem!’

Gemima quickly returned her arms-full to the floor but did not release the little one immediately. She did, however, set one hand free to withdraw a handkerchief from her bodice ... *but we anticipate. Days, whole years, must be worked over before we shall return to this moment.*

* * * * *

Harry had been working for Johnson for some year and a half and had worked through two harvests and a planting. He had learned to shear sheep and to otherwise care for those animals, he had been early introduced to and had mastered the art of horse-team management and handling and knew that the business of land-clearing was arduous, that it could be dangerous. He knew, too, that once cleared, acreages needed to be fenced and that the kangaroos which raided the pastures and crops had to be shot. Most of all, Harry had learned of the part that water played in the selection and clearing of what seemed to him at first a vast, almost limitless area of land. He knew, too, that in general the land was rather infertile. The patches of “red dirt” in it had mostly been “taken up” — especially around those areas where natural, permanent water supplies existed. The lesser land in between these bands and outcrops of ancient volcanic soil was difficult, requiring earthen dams to be excavated in the hope of storing the excess run-off of the wet season in order to water stock

in summer. This land though in most cases was quite suitable for growing seasonal crops of wheat or oats or barley. "Further out" — which meant east — towards South Australia, there was, indeed, a vast almost boundless area of land which was unfit for ordinary agriculture because of its scant and irregular rainfall.

While gaining this experience Harry and Margaret with the child, lived in a cottage on his employer's farm, in accommodation which could not but remind Harry of his own childhood. The cottage was a dwelling of two rooms with a lean-to verandah. Harry always slept on the verandah, always alone, while Margaret and Catherine occupied the second room. The main room served as kitchen, living area, bathroom and, on occasions as a laundry. Their furniture, except for beds and table, consisted entirely of wooden packing cases. The floors were of compacted earth. Each room had one window space — equipped with a wooden shutter tacked together from packing case deal. In winter, with shutters closed against the howling winds that screeched in from the largely feature-less plain, the interior of the cottage was tomb-dark. Lamps were lit day and night. At such times, Harry was thankful to be out of doors, even though at times the cold was practically unbearable. Then, he and Catherine, wearing most of the working clothes they possessed and hooded under old wheat sacks, went about farm duties St Giles and his dog fashion. Harry dragged himself around like a wintering monk, Catherine scampering after or beside him like a nosey pup.

Margaret cooked and cleaned in the farmer's house. She and Harry had been engaged as a couple. It was expected that the woman of such a duo would be available for duties as prescribed by the farmer or his wife. So Margaret was away from the cottage for most of the day. Her day began at five o'clock each morning, when she was required to go over to the main house to light the fire in the kitchen range and have the kettle boiling for the farmer when he got up at a quarter to six.

Harry, by this time, would have already been at work by four-thirty and would have begun feeding the horses in readiness for the plough or the harvester, or for log hauling if land clearing was in progress. Catherine often slept in, much to her annoyance, and would wake to find herself the only occupant of the cottage. Whenever this happened, she would dress quickly and dash off to the stables where she would berate Harry with the vituperative fervour that only a young, favoured female child holds patent.

Catherine would top up her sleep needs during the day — on the floor of a cart, supported by Harry's arm on a wagon seat, atop a stack of wheat sacks or in a wool bin, a

hay stack, even in a horse manger: wherever, upon waking, she was assured of seeing Harry first. And in the dark evenings Harry and she would read from the few dog-eared children's books which Catherine loved and never tired of. She came to know the stories in them by heart and was able to recite their texts sometimes without one reference to the written word. But Catherine hated arithmetic and, as this art was no specialty of Harry's, her additions and subtractions larger than ten were painfully laborious.

There had been no change in Margaret's relationship with the father of her child, except that she no longer bothered to slip into Harry's bed at night when Catherine was asleep. The man's indifference to her had at last out-weighed the value to her of whatever gratification his sensual nearness to her might offer. And the child, Catherine, had no especial love of her, it seemed to Margaret who herself had never learned either to give or accept affection easily. She received more notice from Johnson, her employer, than ever she did from her own family and with this she made herself content for the time being.

Bradbury came to work on the farm in the late summer of Harry's second year at Johnson's. No other quarters were available for him, so he slept in a tent pitched in the corner of the barn. He was a man of perhaps thirty-five, strong, black-bearded, with devilment in his eye. Only six weeks after his arrival, Bradbury had left again, taking with him a fine chestnut gelding complete with harness and the farmer's sulky.

It was Harry who first found the horse and buggy missing at five of the morning. Thinking to rouse Bradbury to ask him if he had heard Johnson leave the farm during the night — an unlikely and dangerous thing, given the state of the track. Johnson, who seemed a level-headed man, was hardly one to risk his horse, his sulky of which he was so proud, or his life, for that matter, by driving about in the dark.

Puzzling over this strange turn of events, Harry entered the barn and found Bradbury's tent deserted not only of the man in question but also of that person's effects. No trace of him remained.

'Miriam! Miriam!' he heard the name shouted, as he approached the house. Entering the kitchen, Harry first encountered Margaret bending over the stove top examining the fire through the aperture uncovered by removal of the cast iron kettle now standing on the hob. She turned her head to look at him. Not even an expression of surprise or query affected her blank regard of him. Harry had time for little more than a glance at her before Johnson burst into the room.

‘Miri ... ’ the man had commenced to bellow before he realized that not only was his wife not there but that Harry was in the room. He changed his message instantly.

‘What the hell are you doing here, Coates?’ he shouted then in a lower tone addressed the other occupant of the kitchen: ‘Have you seen my wife this morning, Mrs Coates?’ Johnson demanded.

Margaret shook her head in response.

‘What about you, Coates?’ Johnson almost sneered, as if the very preposterousness of his question implied that his enquiry was a useless formality.

Harry had not seen Mrs Johnson and rarely did. It was Bradbury who had liked to hang about the kitchen door. Harry had thought it was Margaret the man was interested in. He could not help but smile.

‘I think you ought to know ... Jim,’ Harry pronounced his employer’s name with deliberate emphasis. The latter’s addressing him as “Coates” had been a revelation to him. He and Johnson had been on egalitarian first-name terms since the start. ‘I think you ought to know that Bradbury appears to be missing, too — along with Dancer ... and the buggy.’

Johnson, both as a man to be admired, who had wrestled with and tamed this land comprising his farm and who then made a success of it, and as an employer, began to decline in Harry’s estimation. Before long, the change in the man arising from his wife’s desertion of him began to take its effect. Johnson was drinking heavily, flew into rages on encountering the slightest impingement through circumstances upon his free will, and began to make unsound judgements. Harry was by this time capable enough to maintain the chores and seasonal activities of the farm. So by simply following the routines Johnson had taught him, Harry began to find himself taking over the farm’s day to day management. Far from resenting this responsibility, he found enjoyment in this activity, since performing these tasks yielded him valuable experience against the day when he would have his own farm, he hoped, somewhere in this area — if the opportunity of ownership arose and he could afford it.

Johnson spent much of his day either in Sapphire Valley or nearby it, in Northam, using the farmhouse only occasionally for sleeping, often staying away for days at a time. It was as though he could not bear to be standing on his own acres any more; as though he could not bear the house nor want to be anywhere near the place of his desertion.

Harry was not the only one to realize that if Johnson went on as he was, the man would inevitably face ruin. Johnson, when on the farm, as angry as a wild bull, attempted no work and watched, as though pawing the ground when, one autumn morning, Harry made ready the plough in preparation for turning over the "Forty Acre" which long before, when he was sane, Johnson had said would be put to wheat.

'Don't dare move that plough, Coates! I decide when that plough moves; not you!' The man's face was purple, his speech slurred. There was no mistaking his serious intent. He had a light rifle in the crook of his arm, which Harry kept a close eye upon.

'I thought that after the rain last night, Jim, we'd better get him ready,' Harry replied as levelly as his racing heartbeats would allow. The man was mad, surely?

'Bloody rain!' Johnson cried. 'Bloody rain drives every bloody thing, including us! I'll give y' rain, y' bastard!'

Harry sprang for the only cover available: the rather skeletal iron framework of the six-furrow plough he had been working on, and flattened himself on the ground, behind one of the winged mould-boards.

Mad Johnson aimed the rifle skywards and let off the five shots in the magazine, each in rapid succession of its predecessor, interspersing each discharge with the word 'bastard!' each utterance more raving than the last. When the rifle magazine was empty, the man threw the weapon down in disgust.

While Johnson's outburst had been wondrous enough, its bewildering effects on Harry were as nothing compared to the spectacle that followed. Harry had hardly finished thinking how thankful he was that he had left Catherine catching up on her sleep in the horse manger when his eyes fixed upon the figure of a woman frantically gesticulating as she ran across the field towards the spot where Johnson had fired the gun.

'Jim!' Harry heard the woman scream. 'Jim!' And as she drew nearer, close enough to see that he was unhurt; 'Jim! Thank God! Thank God!' On reaching him, the woman flung her arms about him, appearing to weep for joy that he was alive. Her face was obscured to Harry, who lay still on the ground behind the plough, in the after-effects of shock. Suddenly, the woman in Johnson's embrace must have caught sight of some portion of him.

'Jim!' Harry heard her say. 'You have killed him! There wasn't any need to do that. Now, what will you do? You silly bugger, Jim!'

He saw Johnson straighten. 'Killed him? Killed who?' Johnson scoffed.

'Why, Harry ... Coates!'

It was Margaret! The woman was Margaret! And Harry cared so little he got up and revealed himself to her. He didn't even blink as, because it was clear that he was unharmed, the woman kissed Johnson passionately and led him away, in the direction of the farm house.

'Harry, Harry!' he heard screamed at him from the direction of the stables. 'What's the big idea?' the child accused, recovering herself from the first snuggles of reunion against him.

'Well may you ask, chicken. But I think something wonderful has happened, right under our very noses!' he replied. The cruelty of his words was lost on the little girl. For Harry, a window of hope again opened in an instant and through it he glimpsed a restoration of the future that in Fremantle had been his delight to imagine. There was Catherine, of course, but instead of Margaret, there was Rosa. The details of how he was to effect the realization of his forward plans might occupy the future, as well. Now, at this minute he, Harry Coates, felt himself to be free as he had never been before and that all he had endured in life so far had been for a purpose which this revelatory moment had just disclosed to him.

At the auction of Johnson's place, three months after the Bank had foreclosed on its mortgage, Harry was able to buy the farm following negotiations with the same lender. Stock — sheep, a working team of eight horse, two milking cows and three pigs, were retained and included in items under lien, as the bank put it, as well as essential working plant. At the conclusion of the deal, Harry was left with just enough capital to see him through the remainder of the season — and just Catherine, for helper. At least they had a proper house to live in, Harry said to her as, returning from Northam after signing away all he possessed and becoming party to some twenty-year-long mortgage, the pair over-looked what at least one of them hoped was to become their permanent home. The Cornishman in the ex-miner never raised a homesickness-wrought tear. These acres would be accepted into his blood. Unbeknownst to Harry, those of his family not present were stepped away from, probably forever, losing their way in terms of influence in what was so often referred to as "the tyranny of distance".

Johnson, with Margaret, had left the district together. No-one knew their destination. No-one had heard anything of Miriam Johnson, either. Bradbury had been apprehended at Guildford, trying to sell the horse and was now in Fremantle gaol, everyone knew; but nothing had been heard of Miriam Johnson — or of the stolen sulky.

CHAPTER Eleven

Only buttocks presented for thrashing could appease his more or less perpetually enduring nagging displeasure, and then only temporarily unless the supply of posteriors was plentiful, in which case his anxiety was directed to the rose garden outside his classroom window, whence grew his canes. Stripped of thorns out of deference to parental concerns, a whip taken from a climbing "Blackboy" rose wielded by the fist of head-teacher Mr Westman would have made a memorable welt on the most weathered of cheeks. The tender arse of the schoolboy was no match before, during or after the cane's imposition. With a degree of awe, respect and thanksgiving, we little kids appreciated Mr Westman's rule that only senior boys should ever be thus whipped and generally our terror of the cane was vicarious and therefore thrilling.

Mr Westman had a second very obvious streak of character which was almost as intriguing as his lust for a good beating of bums. This was his tolerance for — almost love of — a small, Mongoloid child in our junior school. The boy was revolting to be near and smelled abominably by the end of the day. He had a tongue several sizes too big for his mouth that lolled onto his chin like a dog's and, understandably, he was inarticulate. Mr Westman was often to be surprised being kind to little Wilf — an action we, the lad's classmates, took to be a rejection of ourselves — something not so puzzling perhaps, to the adult mind.

My teacher, Mr Westman's assistant, was a maiden lady born and bred locally, named Miss Morris. She was a gentle soul, kindly and full of care for her charges — charges she gave it to be understood, she would defend against all comers, Mr Westman included, if needs be.

Among Miss Morris's children was the greater part of one family's offspring — two boys and a girl — who, together with another two boys in the upper-school classroom went to and from school in a horse-drawn trap. They travelled about eight miles each way and spent a lot of time, especially in the warmer weather, sleeping at their desks. These children ranged in age from seven to fourteen. Each, including the youngest, rose at five-thirty, milked a quota of one to three cows, fed the pigs and in season helped to load fruit boxes for dispatch to the markets. Then the eldest caught the horse and harnessed it while the others ate breakfast, he joining them at table as soon as he could. The nag was old, took an hour and more to dawdle into town and, like its cargo, spent the day comatose more

often than not but in the shade of a gum tree adjacent to the school grounds. The elder of the two boys in our room was a renowned sleeper, given to waking up and saying the first thing that came into his head — or was it the last word of a dream? Anyway, fame at last became his when he was expelled, only briefly, from the classroom, the only person ever in living memory to be so disgraced by Miss Morris. The child awoke unexpectedly one afternoon in the middle of a history lesson. Only English history was real in those days, except for John Macarthur's impressions of his times in the far-off Eastern States. Certain Commonwealth men were about to be impeached, the good King arriving on the scene, however, after the curtain had been raised; after the rebels had spoken and had already had made their exit. Something about the birds having flown followed in Miss Morris's version of the event. Some of us who had been following the story were amused by the King's alleged outburst, especially those of us already showing signs of republicanism. We cheered. Our sleeper awoke, stared fixedly at Miss Morris seated on a straight-backed chair in front of the class and asked with deep concern: "How far up do your stockings go, Miss Morris?" Little Freddie was flung out of the room and Miss Morris retired to a position behind her desk where her legs were hidden. We did sums for the rest of the afternoon.

Father, on leave, visited us in the May school holidays. Uncle Bevan "knew" a spot in the Whitewood River where marron apparently gathered as thick as boy scouts at a jamboree. A single raid, on a moon-lit night, netted a wheat-bag full of the squirming crustaceans which all of us — except Eveline — tucked into, post-the attentions of Auntie Mona.

Turning marron red is more than embarrassing for them. Eveline turned her face red, white and her toes nearly up as a bagful of the cross creatures fell from their up-ended jute confinement into the wash-copper filled with boiling water. Mercifully, they blushed fairly quickly and were delicious. I remembered, as I hoed into my portion of the haul, how Eveline had called a halt to the proposed immersion of three gilgies she had once caught in our "home" creek at Parkerville, preferring to let them find their own way home from a distance of three quarters of a mile rather than let their torture last a mere second or two.

Time efflucted. Father went away. School reformed. Slit-trench practice resumed. Slit-trench drill in my young and innocent mind had not yet gained the libidinous connotation it had in the thoughts of bigger boys. So it just meant fleeing the school building at a given

signal and crouching low in the zig-zag pits dug in the yard for our protection in the event of ... “air raids including bombing”. Bombing was considered a definite possibility, because of the strategically-valuable resource the district boasted: a flax mill. Pilots who mistakenly bombed the school in lieu of the mill would have to be a cretins — but then, that’s how we were encouraged to see the Japanese.

* * * * *

1.

Rosa was enchanted by the new house her husband, the Reverend Joshua Samuels provided her with upon their marriage. From its bay windows she could see the ocean and as far out to sea as the telescope which stood in the window of the drawing room and the weather of the day permitted. One of Rosa’s greatest delights was in locating the top-masts of approaching ships and in knowing that, perhaps sometimes, she had evidence of a vessel’s arrival before those aboard it had sighted the port.

That Joshua’s church was a mean one, in a disreputable part of the town, did not bother her. After all, sea ports “at home” were notorious sink-holes as well. Why should Fremantle be different, since although located in the most isolated corner of this huge continent, it was populated by the same mix of veneered morality, indifference and downright depravity that represented the life of the times elsewhere in the world? She and her Aunt Gemima, like herself a pragmatist in some ways, had often discussed their new homeland in terms of its difference to the England of their knowledge. Both admitted that their experiences of life would be described by another as “limited”. That “other” might have been surprised, even shocked, had he or she been party to some of the ladies’ topics of conversation.

Both Gemima and Rosa, when they looked at life and the lives of others, as they frequently did, admitted that the uses of a shovel were various and not confined to clearing the ash out of fireplaces in refined people’s living rooms; that excrement was a natural, vital product of life. Their talk and thoughts, however, did not end with this production; but had progressed to the consequences of life and to the best ways of coping with it.

If Rosa missed any part of her old life it was her Aunt Gemima’s practicality and her genuine, reliable responses to the puckering imperfections prevailing in an otherwise ideal existence. Rosa had lost access to her intellectual twin, a half of her that Joshua Samuels, perfect to her eyes in every other way, was not as yet the presence to fill.

Gemima Capstock was finding herself better placed in her separation from dear Rosa. For the first time in many years she was able to reach a plane other than the traditional,

caring, mothering one she had been satisfied to be on with Charlotte Sommers. Charlotte had anyway identified more with Rosa, and in most of her needs was content to turn to her. When only a real mother's comfort could negate the child's anxieties, then would her Aunty Gem alone do. These occasions had been very few and far between — such as when her birthday approached and Christmas drew near mostly. It was then in the child's thoughts memories of her mother and father became uppermost.

Shortly after Charlotte had informed her Aunty Gem of Harry Coates having left the town, Gemima received a scrawled note from Harry, in which he asked her to tell Charlotte, if she thought it wise, of the rumoured existence of a “mad sea captain” in the far-off margins of the agricultural belt. This man, it was said, was attempting to make a farm for himself in the scrubby country well to the east. Harry had ended his note with a circumspect enquiry as to the health and situation of Rosa Compton.

Since then, the marriage of Rosa to Josh Samuels had intervened. Although Gemima realized the probable importance of Harry's news, she was then at a loss as to what to do about it. By the time she brought herself to broach the subject with Charlotte, and Gemima's letter in reply ultimately found him, Harry was the ostensible owner of Johnson's farm.

Harry Coates Esquire responded to Gemima's correspondence almost straight away. Although his mind was elsewhere, the letter from the past had re-affirmed Rosa to him. He found returning to him the old longing that had dogged his former years and with it, a new hope bred of his changed circumstances. What if he had seen and heard the last of Margaret? But could he ever be sure of that? True, he argued to himself as he had done many times before this, he had never been married to the girl. But he had not denied that relationship whenever it had been assumed. And if he had, there was always Catherine to think of. Could he ever admit that she was a ... a bastard? How could she be, anyway? Hadn't her mother ... ? The line of thought became repulsive to him. Any alliance with Rosa Compton, even if she were willing, was out of the question. He still would send a reply to Gemima Capstock. It would be right for Charlotte to find her father and yes, he admitted to the small voice arguing for it from within, it would be nice to see and meet again with people from the past, though his mind's eye for a moment was filled only with

the image of Charlotte Sommers as she was on the Dorian: eleven years old, precocious, and entertaining all with her vivacity.

More resolvable matters were mooted, however and took precedence in Harry's considerations just three weeks later. Because Johnson had emptied his bank account before he had fled with Margaret, various monies due to the Bank had not been received by it. Johnson had financed his loan by issuing his own promissory notes, some of which were now due, according to the Bank's head office. The Northam Branch, believing that Harry's loan was secured by these notes, had overlooked the need for him to sign his own. This confusion had to be cleared up within a week or the Bank's loan to him would be withdrawn — a threat conveyed to him in the baldest terms by the manager's personal letter. Already the letter was six days old by the time Harry received it. He would have to drive in to Northam tomorrow.

When Fate conspires with Chance, the outcome of this confluence in terms of change is often sensational. Such was the case when Charlotte, with Gemima Capstock, emerged from The Farmers' Own hotel in the bush town of Northam and collided with Harry Coates walking towards the National Bank, hand in hand with Catherine.

From the conversation which ensued, excitedly led mostly by Charlotte, it transpired that although Gemima Capstock had received Harry's letter telling her what he had heard about the "eccentric loner" and his bush block out in the scrub, the two women were on their way back to Perth after pursuing what turned out to be a wild goose chase, looking for someone who might have seen Charlotte's father. Gemima suggested the tearoom opposite as being perhaps a better place for them to talk. Catherine, once the decision was made, led the way after spying the Ices sold here sign on the teashop window. The little girl's formal education was limited to whatever Harry had been able to pass on to her and to a large extent, man and child had learned to read and write together using the simple syllabus of practical necessity. But iced confection, to Catherine's mind being one of life's imperatives and a thing read about in advertisements but only rarely met with, urgently required satisfaction whenever the chance arose to enjoy it..

The four settled at a window table in the bright, sparsely-furnished tearoom, with the tea ordered and Catherine quietened and immersed in the pleasure of a double helping of strawberry-flavoured ice lolly, Harry was first to resume their interrupted conversation:

'If you didn't receive my letter then ...?'

Gemima Capstock took charge of the reply. 'It was Charlotte. In the newspaper there was this report of a terrible episode which had occurred in the ... district with the funny name, It doesn't matter, just now. Anyway, it seems that a poor man, thought to have been someone by the name of Summers — spelled with a "u" — a one-time sea captain, had drowned in a farm dam. There was some lurid account of some chap finding him accidentally, along with a bit I don't understand to do with the horses on this property — how they had died of thirst rather than go near the dam in which this dead person was floating. Charlotte was sure it was her father. But as I keep telling her, it's not certain.'

'I think it was my father, Harry.' Charlotte announced quite positively. 'We went to the property. It was, they said, just as this man left it. In the house, I found a book ... this one,' Charlotte paused as she placed a time and weather bedraggled copy of Goldsmith on the table. 'I'm sure it is the same one from which my father read to me on the voyage to Australia. He had such a lovely speaking voice when he read aloud to me. I can hear it now ... He could have had it in his pocket when he left the ship. We — he and I — were going to spend the night ashore, I think. Perhaps he thought he would read to me, that night.'

Harry could offer no honest response to this, so was searching for something appropriate to say such as he felt the moment called for when the barrier of this contretemps was thrown down by the child, Catherine, squealing uninhibitedly as was her wont: 'Oh! look, Harry!' and dashing out onto the pavement before the shop where a genial golden labrador stood smiling at her and wagging its tail in a most amiable fashion.

'She'll be all right,' Harry replied to the question implied by Gemima's raised eyebrows, 'especially with that dog, I think.'

Harry smiled as he saw Catherine feeding the last of her ice lolly to the animal.

'She's a bright little button, Harry. Is she your daughter?'

'Charlotte, really!'

'I'm sure you are dying to know, just as I am, Aunty Gem. You didn't answer my question, Harry.' Charlotte was used to talking to him so directly; always had been.

'Nor should he! I don't know what's come over you, Charlotte! Don't answer her, Harry, if you don't want to.'

Harry looked at Charlotte — long enough to cause her to lower her eyes from his, just for a moment. 'I have looked after her most of her life,' Harry replied, he too lowering his eyes.

‘No, that won’t do. I want to know, Harry.’ There was a seriousness in her tone that made Harry look up, sharply.

‘I could tell you, Charlotte but you wouldn’t believe it,’ he was about to say when Catherine appeared again at his side, pleading for him to buy her a dog just like that one. Instead, he took the little girl on his knee and quietened her.

‘Are you going back to Perth today?’ he asked Gemima, meaning to include Charlotte as well.

Before Mrs Capstock could answer, Charlotte intervened. ‘We are too late for the train, today. We will have to stay in town overnight, isn’t that right, Aunty Gem?’

‘Then they could come to our farm, couldn’t they, Harry?’ Catherine contributed, almost as quickly.

‘I’m sure, little miss, that these two ladies would rather go shopping ... or look around the town ... whatever ladies do.’

‘What a splendid idea, don’t you think so too, Aunty Gem?’ Charlotte continued recklessly.

‘Come on, Aunty Gem. Be a sport. Come to our place.’ This from the smallest member of the tea party destroyed any lingering shreds of formality from the ladies’ meeting with Harry. So, in very quick time all was arranged. Harry would first attend to the business which had brought him into Northam; next he would take the opportunity to shop for provisions and then, all together in the trap, they would go out to the farm for a very late lunch.

The splendid hills of rich red soil which had lain for aeons past beneath a covering of natural vegetation and now bared and regimented to conform to a new sense of order all lost their power to enthrall the proud eye of the farmer in Harry. The skyline lost its grace and the green pastures forfeited their power to engender pleasure. Placid cows and sheep looked sullen, lambs that once frolicked now seemed crazed and the earth’s barren places loomed to prominence. Harry Coates fell silent. He heard nothing and nothing more for several miles. The trap continued to jolt and rattle and the child to prattle on.

Gemima alone wondered; but Charlotte, captured by the ensnaring ingenuousness of little Catherine, hardly noticed.

Of course he hadn’t heard; didn’t know. Should she have been more circumspect? How else might she have put it? Any way, there had been nothing specific in Rosa’s behaviour

towards this strangely-mannered young person. Rosa had never seriously said anything that may have been construed to be more than a natural interest in a fellow being's affairs. But a glimpse of the man's stricken face when the subject of Rosa's marriage to Joshua Samuels was mentioned spoke volumes to that young woman's perspicacious aunt.

So: Harry Coates really had loved Rosa! Poor man! But why had he not said something, done something; why had he not spoken to the girl, called upon her? Did it matter, now? Too bad! He would simply have to get over it and get on with his own life. Gemima, though, could not but spare him some sympathy. His sense of loss, if he indeed had loved Rosa as much as his expression betrayed, must be at this moment as much as had been her own when her dear Reggie ... Gemima extended her gloved hand and rested it consolingly upon Harry's arm.

Harry jerked back to the present, attempted a smile. 'Yonder,' he said, turning his face away and indicating the view across the rich farmland valleys, 'is the best farming land in the district. Grows the best wheat, the fattest cattle and the finest sheep. And,' he said, breaking off to force a laugh, 'the brightest whisky noses to be seen outside the best clubs in Perth.'

'Oh? So you know about the best clubs in Perth, do you, Mr Coates?'

This was Charlotte, blundering in, quite inadvertently, upon a moment in Harry's life that only Gemima Capstock besides had any inkling of how bravely it was being faced.

Harry looked blankly at the girl at first before catching the measure of her remark and making some dissembling response to it.

The buggy rolled on, each of its occupants silent at once. The jangle of the harness, the whirring of the wheels in the uncharacteristically soft, sandy surface of that particular stretch of road, the muted thud of the horse's hooves, added to the air of quiet contemplation in which all seemed lost.

'Is it far?' Charlotte was the first to speak.

'Young lady ... do I detect in that remark the typical inquisitiveness of the girl I used to know back in Fremantle? You'd never guess' and here Harry spoke only to Mrs Capstock: 'how busy Charlotte would keep me answering her questions as we went about making deliveries, Mrs Capstock!'

'Indeed! Believe me, Mr Coates. I knew nothing of this! Really, Charlotte! Did you actually ... did you ride around with Harry on that produce wagon?' Gemima feigned shock,

although Charlotte was well aware that her Aunty Gem had known about her escapades all along.

‘Never fear, Mrs Capstock,’ Harry interposed light-heartedly ‘Your ward’s honour was never at risk — only her clothes!’

‘I am pleased to hear it. And yes, I know all about the clothes!’

2.

This was their beginning. A year later, Harry and Charlotte were married in Northam by the visiting Reverend Joshua Samuels.

Not long after the newly wed pair moved into the house on the farm, but at a respectably decent interval, they were joined by Gemima Capstock who was to become an essential part of their family. Young Catherine quickly adopted the elderly lady as her very own Aunty Gem. Of course Catherine still loved Harry, and had quickly added Charlotte to her list of precious possessions; but for sheer warmth and comfort when the growing girl needed it, nothing, she found, could exceed that offered by her new Aunty Gem.

Charlotte early had accepted the account Harry offered her in regard to the advent of Catherine into his life. She didn’t care. Harry was hers, now. Again, there was a man in her life, a real, flesh and blood man. For all those years she had lived with just memory. With Harry, it was as though her life had a chance to re-start and she wasn’t intending to inhibit its future prospects by placing upon it proscriptions not of her own devising. If winning Harry meant accepting Catherine’s existence, well and good. If in winning Harry, she had accepted her prize in the pretty certain knowledge that it was Rosa he had for years preferred over her, the existence of the child in their new relationship was a mere nothing.

For Harry, a new world seemed to open, one almost as gratifying and soul-affecting as his first thoughts on acquiring the Johnson property — not that he regarded Charlotte in any material way. For some months he was simply unbelieving of his new wife’s devotion to him. He found it incredible that in all his years of moping for another, this girl had suffered in love as he had; that she had endured the same sort of misery as he had himself, yet she still entertained no bitterness, no resentment of him and had been able to forgive him and pursue her own vision of happiness so steadfastly. Where he in the past had allowed the circumstances of the moment to elbow him into comings and goings, Harry admiringly saw Charlotte as one who knew beforehand the goal of her existence. There was a wonderful-

ness about this mature Charlotte that Harry could not entirely get his mind to believe in — at first. He came to really understand her, and perhaps to love her most, only years later, when the passions within himself were dulled and the inevitability of parting, as his season came to a close, was written in the clouds.

CHAPTER Twelve

Suddenly, the war was over. Two bombs had been used to devastate two Japanese cities and suddenly there was no more war. We evacuees were returned to our parents. Father, soon to be demobbed, had been able to rent an old house in Subiaco. Mother, too, had returned from her “bush” teaching post, big sister now a working girl, also re-joined the family and together we faced the future as a concerted entity again.

Post-discharge from the Air Force, Father had applied to become and had been accepted as a War Service Land Settlement candidate and would spend the next three years in suspense working at various temporary jobs until “his number came up”. His “number” turned out to be two thousand acres of mixed quality land in the Great Southern agricultural district. At fourteen years of age, I was to be the labour force — that had tipped the scales in his favour at Father’s pre-allocation interview.

* * * * *

The track from the old Johnson homestead ran straight to the flat where it joined the public road, then ran for another half mile until it began snaking up the hill through Jensen’s block, where it disappeared into a stand of York gums and scrub.

It was only on the rare days when it rained that the progress of traffic on the track, in this case a four-wheeled wagonette with a dirt-stained canvas cover, could not be plotted by the observer at the kitchen window.

Grizzly Cullen, general carrier, of his own volition would collect whatever mail there was for the farms which happened to lie upon the particular route he was contracted to run. He had done this for as long as most people could remember. So accustomed to Grizzly’s philanthropy had the outlying district’s inhabitants become that some people had taken his kindnesses for granted and had actually complained to him about his neglect on the rare occasions when he had overlooked this one or that.

Sometimes twice a week Grizzly came to the point where the track met the surveyed road below Coates’s place and would drop whatever mail there was in the roadside box Harry had set up for him. On a very hot day when, so he said, his horses could ‘do with a drink’, like today, Grizzly would bring his wagonette up to the water trough by the house and say ‘Yes, I reckon I could take a cuppa tea while they be resting’. To such a request Charlotte was only too pleased to respond in exchange for some adult human conversation.

Such a “Grizzly” day it was in the parlance which stood for a mail day when, perhaps among the envelopes containing store accounts and local government notices, sale advices, or between the stock agents’ journals and brochures, there just might be a travel-stained envelope bearing a sea-mail stamp from home, or something from Aunt Gem, in Perth. Once, a few years back, there had been a letter from Margaret, telling Harry that she was going to America. The news was nearly two years old; and Catherine didn’t care, anyway.

That was the trouble with news of that sort — like when Tommy had written to tell Harry that he, too, was emigrating and how his ship would be calling in to Fremantle. By the time Harry had got the letter, Tommy had come, and gone — on to Adelaide in South Australia.

Eagerly watched by Charlotte since his wagonette first appeared out of the scrub up by Jensen’s, Grizzly Cullen paused at the mail box down on the flat, but only briefly. It was easily a “Grizzly” day, when man and beast were in need of a rest. Charlotte turned away from the window to push the simmering kettle on the hob into the centre of the stove top. Grizzly would be here in ten minutes.

‘Is he coming?’ asked the girl. Catherine was at a table in one corner of the room, as far from the wood-fired cooking stove as she could get. A scorching breeze dried perspiration in an instant so in an attempt to humidify her work area, the girl had placed on the floor beneath a window a large, flat bowl filled with water. She was making a rug out of scraps, her work-pieces having been salvaged in past months from damaged skins of sheep that had met their ends in various ways less tidily than from natural causes. In Catherine’s present work, utility was uppermost in her mind. The rugs were consumable. Unless they were very carefully stored when not in use, weevils made very short work of them. The skins were simply dried — not tanned.

‘Yes, Miss. Grizzly the postman will be here ... now! Or so Garibaldi says. Wash your hands. Tea’s up!’

In an instant the girl threw down her work and, regardless of the heat, ran out of the house. Before Grizzly Cullen had a chance to raise himself from his high seat, Catherine was beside the wagonette, excitedly calling up to him: ‘Any letters, Mr Cullen?’

‘Could be, Cathy. There just could be. All in good time. Whoa there! Charlie boy,’ Cullen called, dismounting. He was probably sixty, they said. They’d find him dead in his cart, one day, they said. It was his long wiry unkempt beard, not his nature, for which they had awarded him the appellation “Grizzly”.

Cullen was a sprightly man with a twinkle in those eyes of his if one bothered to search for them under the scrub-like eyebrows encrusting his forehead. He wore a dusty bowler hat in all seasons, one which he had acquired in Perth. The hat was something which had accrued to him somehow, he said, after a night of over-indulgence at the bar of the Australia hotel and he wore it in memory of his one deviation from the routines of country life in thirty years. Not for Grizzly Cullen the whiz and roar of the town. Since his childhood at Oban where he was born and where his youth had been spent on the fishing boats around the Western Isles of Scotland, Ian Cullen had been happiest when left to his own thoughts. He was not adverse to a little human company now and then. That of young Catherine Coates he found ideal, she being young, not unpleasant to look at, un-critical as yet and prepared to accept the veracity of his stories without a trace of doubt.

Grizzly sighed inwardly as he looked down at her earnest, up-turned face. He already knew there was no letter — at least, no letter young Catherine would be interested in. He had pondered whether to go up to the house today; had almost decided to push on to Busby's. It was Charlie who had decided him, who looked around at him, almost asking the question. The old horse knew the drill: ninety degrees plus Fahrenheit and it was drinks at the Coates' trough for himself and Delphine. There was no nicety-inspired quandary in Charlie's mind. Almost before Grizzly knew it, the horse was leading his vacillator to a resolution, raising a trot of increasing pace as, with the thus-inspired Delphine at his side, he neared that which in equine terms equalled an Elysium with spring water to boot.

Grizzly had no qualms at all in leaving decisions as regards directions en-route to his horses. The animals had, after all, done the same number of trips as he himself, they with far more input in terms of effort. As was the case with most successful bushmen, Grizzly gave respect to his horses, which they returned as devotion.

'Just let's get Charlie to the trough, sweetheart. Delph's keen as well, today.'

Together the old man and the girl manoeuvred the animals through the gate and into the stable yard. At the trough, Charlie and Delphine, necks stretched forward, drank deep and would presumably have emptied the vessel had not their master intervened with 'That's enough, you two. You've wetted your whistles. Any more and I'll be pulling the cart with you two lounging like a pair of bloated ticks on my seat. Back there!'

The wagonette was carefully backed away from the trough, it and horses then parked in the sparse shade of three huge York gums left growing beside the house. That ritual disposed of, Grizzly turned his attention to the mail.

‘There we are, lass,’ he said, handing Catherine a bundle of items tied with twine. ‘That’s your lot. Reckon I could take a cuppa tea while they be resting,’ he said as though soliloquising.

‘It’s ready, in the house,’ Catherine replied mechanically on cue, having untied the small bundle handed her. She skimmed through the envelopes, searched them in vain then followed behind Grizzly Cullen.

Charlotte was standing in the doorway, holding the screen door ajar in welcome, her youngest, a boy of three just awake from his afternoon nap draped sleepily over her shoulder.

‘Come in, Mr Cullen. Would you care for a cup of tea? Sit down. Make yourself comfortable. Cathy will attend to it. It’s no trouble. Just excuse me for a minute while I get rid of this little fellow. He’s feeling the heat. They get so hot sleeping — Cathy?’

Cathy removed the large, heavy brown china teapot from the hob and began to fill the three teacups already set upon the table.

Grizzly Cullen looked on in silence, his old bowler hat on his knees, himself seated in the big leather armchair usually offered to guests. Charlotte had spent so many hours of her life to date in that chair, feeding the children — first Sybil, then almost without pause, Sophie, followed by young Tomos and, lastly, the little boy whom she was now settling on the floor in the “other room”. Charlotte’s mother had been born in Devon, her father in Cornwall. In their childhoods, her mother and father, then unknown to each other, had been kept apart by the river Tamar which forms the boundary between those counties. It was Charlotte’s whim to conjoin her parents by naming her last-born “Tamar”. Tamar Coates was just three years old.

‘It’ll be harvest before we knows it, Missus,’ said Grizzly, wiping his brow with his version of a handkerchief — some dubious-looking piece of rag dragged from inside his waistcoat. This waistcoat he wore in summer as an outer garment over a collar-less striped blue and white shirt. In winter it concealed most of a thick, grey flannel undershirt. Cullen’s trousers were generally black. No woman dared guess their original hue. Grizzly Cullen’s boots, though, were a talking point. Each year, while other men his age seemed to shrink annually, Grizzly’s height remained the same, they said, because each year he added another thick layer of leather to the soles of his boots. He did his own boot repairs — by the simple expedient of hammering on a new sole over it as the last one wore out.

‘Yes, I was out at the eighty-acres yesterday. The wheat’s definitely ripening. It’s such a beautiful time of the year, isn’t it? So hot, now, though.’

‘It’s going to be one terrible year for fires, Missus, with a spring like we’re having. Never used to be so dry so early like this. The weather’s changing, bet me.’

Charlotte smiled. “bet me” is how Grizzly Cullen emphasized any point he wished to underline. When Grizzly said “bet me” you could be sure that the truth of his fore-going statement would be proved for certain sooner or later — or so they said.

‘ ‘course with Harry away like he is, how are you going to get on? Who’s going to work the binder? At least, that’s what I’d be asking,’ Grizzly mumbled, more to himself than anybody as he burrowed his nose into his tea-cup.

‘Harry will be back soon, won’t he be, Charlotte?’ Catherine replied, ever quick to fly to her beloved Harry’s defence, even at a just implied criticism of him.

‘Yes, I’m sure he will come home soon,’ Charlotte agreed with a smile.

‘He’s still down south?’ Grizzly enquired in an off-handed way.

‘Yes,’ said Charlotte, adding patiently ‘He should be on his last shed by now.’

This was how the talk proceeded. Charlotte never tired of it. Grizzly’s was an alternative voice to that of the children and Catherine normally said little — to her. It was a different matter when Harry was home. Charlotte then could barely get a word in when those two and the girls — Sophie, especially — began to prattle away.

‘I hope it’s so, Missus. A man should be with his family at this time of the year.’ A misty look seemed to invade the old man’s vision, just for a moment. ‘Thanks for the water.’

Grizzly rose abruptly, placed his bowler on his head, winked solemnly towards Catherine and without further ceremony took his departure. Garibaldi eyed him menacingly from under the rainwater storage tank stand, curled a lip, but took no further action. Charlie and Delphine raised their heads reluctantly, dispassionately watching their colleague’s approach.

Minutes later, the old cartage contractor, resuming his journey, was trotting his horses down the track towards the flat, had turned right at the boundary gate and was heading towards Busby’s, a mile and a half along the road.

Towards evening Catherine, who had not returned to the kitchen after Cullen's departure, changed into shirt and trousers. She paused briefly at the window as she passed to tell Charlotte that she was going out to the two-hundred to check the dam.

'Thanks, love.'

Charlotte was leaving more and more of the farm work to the girl whose moods at times became savage, especially when mail days brought no news of Harry. Catherine's dependence upon the man she called her father seemed at times to Charlotte to be even greater than that of her own, his wife.

Harry never addressed one of his brief notes exclusively to Catherine but that didn't seem to bother the girl. Just as long as he was in communication with his family was all that mattered to her. Her sense of belonging, then, was satisfied.

'Are you riding, Cathy?' Charlotte tried to sound off-hand, tried not to betray to the girl an anxiety which had bedevilled her lately. It was about three weeks since she first began to be troubled by the thought that rushed into her mind these days at the oddest times. She had begun to worry and this was a new sensation for Charlotte. 'What if ... ?' this vigorous little traitor to her usual equanimity would ask. What if something were to happen to Catherine? Having Harry away shearing was bad enough. How would she manage ... alone? At least when Catherine was not riding her Meg, the risk of something harmful occurring to the girl was lessened.

'No, I'm not riding, this time. I feel like a walk.'

Charlotte felt some relief at this, however much she hated responding to the dictates of fear.

On sight of Catherine in work clothes, Garibaldi sprang after her, smiling, laughing, jumping up, racing away then speeding back as though to his pack leader, his atavistic hunting urges aroused, his excitement fevered.

'Come on, dog. It is only a walk,' Charlotte heard cross Catherine admonish Garibaldi, before the yard gate shut with a clang and they were gone.

The drying pasture grasses, still mainly green but now tinged with yellow, foretold of imminent summer and its parching months of heat and dust, its long days of suspended motion. There soon would be days when little could be done but watch and wait: watch for fly-strike in the sheep, watch out for fire in the paddocks; mend fences, chase off marauding kangaroos from the wheat and oat stubbles. Soon enough it would be summer,

when all the ripening was over in the fields, when planting was useless and, if the rains of winter had been adequate, no water needed to be carted.

Catherine had learned to look forward to summer. Harry was home in summer — for three months of it, anyway. She had not been pleased, at first, when Harry went out on the road, shearing. The separation in the beginning was a novelty. Charlotte was either having the children, then, or had produced them and, like new-born lambs, they needed a lot of looking after. The last three years, especially, had been long and lonely. Much as she had come to love Charlotte, Catherine could find no way to have her as a substitute for Harry. Her own mother, Margaret, had been unreliable and had deserted her completely in the end. Catherine was suspicious of all women and would never accept a woman as a substitute mother. She had no hankering, now, for a mother at all. Harry would be enough for her. He was all she wanted.

The patrol to the dam was a ruse, an excuse. At this time of the year, even the silliest of sheep would have no need to go wandering into the treacherous mud surrounding the water or would be likely to even need much of a drink. There was still moisture enough in the grazing.

Wandering over the gently undulating bush pasture, much of it yet little more than native pin-grass, pausing to watch Garibaldi's joyous pursuit of a parrot, or to look at the glistening green new spring foliage of the jam-wattles represented an easing of the ache in this unspoiled girl's breast. It gave relief to a heart as filled with longing as might any prisoner's contemplating happier times.

Catherine had come into Charlotte's life so young, almost baby-ish, and precocious. Yet they had got on well together from the start. Their needs were never in conflict. While Harry's love of Charlotte was as she expected it to be, she understood that he loved Catherine differently, perhaps in a way that Catherine today loved her Garibaldi.

To ponder on these matters in order to define the boundaries of another's loving was not of any signal importance to Charlotte in the early days of her marriage. So soon with two young babies to care for, there was hardly time for problems of an intangible or abstract nature. Survival was then all that seemed important. Charlotte's third child, Tomos, had the good grace to wait upon a favourable season to make his appearance three years after Sophie's, while Tamar-the-last waited even longer to gently ease himself into existence, a perfect gentleman from the beginning.

Charlotte's children were aged twelve, eleven, eight and three. Sybil and Sophie were at the seaside, staying with Rosa and the Reverend Samuels in Fremantle. Tomos was busily rolling out miniature roads as chief engineer of a construction gang of one, between designing and bridge-building, being the foreman-operator of a steam-roller made from wire, string, and a dried-milk tin filled with earth. Tamar was, as usual, contentedly "reading" a book while sitting in the leather, "visitors" chair.

Charlotte had prepared the evening meal and it was now simmering on the stove: a stew of chicken and whatever vegetables she had been able to grow in the damp patch of ground beside the soak. Potatoes she had managed, this year, and onions. A few carrots had come to maturity and the last of these were on the menu tonight. Dried peas soaked in water overnight were already in the pot, coming to the boil. How she and Catherine longed for mutton! Neither of them, however, could bring themselves to kill one of the sheep.

Red meat they would do without. They would have to wait this until Harry came home. Even though they managed most of the other farm work valiantly, butchering was not in them. Chickens had posed problem enough. They learned to avoid the reproach in the birds' terrified eyes as they were taken from the roost. Charlotte and Catherine too soon taught themselves at first to avert their own eyes as the killing blow of the hatchet upon the quivering creature's neck descended to the moment of impact. Chook-killing took a lot of doing, for Charlotte. Catherine became hardened to it quicker, eventually to the point of keeping tally of the longest dash made by a headless corpse post-execution, while Tomos when learning some particulars of the French Revolution from Mr Brady, the schoolteacher at Jensen's Crossing, seemed to find the carnage of poultry beheading day quite informatively illustrative of the former event.

The old Johnson property was as well-regarded as any in the district. Harry had taken it over in times of reasonable prosperity; but the slump in prices for agricultural products occurring early in the eighteen-nineties, along with persistent below-expectation rainfall had re-introduced times equally as hard as ever before experienced on the land. Many families walked off, leaving behind everything except their meagre few personal possessions. Some people didn't even bother with that — they simply left and fled to promised better times on the ever-expanding goldfields of the Yilgarn and Coolgardie. Those with better land, who had been better managers and were prepared to work away

from home managed to hang on, like Harry and Charlotte. Not all wives left to carry on as best they could were as fortunate as Charlotte, who had Catherine to help her out.

As the years of poverty began to lengthen in number, Charlotte became aware of an uneasiness. This un-natural life apart which she and Harry were living made the repeated joy and anguish of reunion and subsequent parting seem pointless. Charlotte felt that her existence was being robbed of any sensible meaning. Another way of life surely must be available to them, something better than this? Then she would remember the silence of a summer evening when the sun was set and the east was painted soft blue and pink and birds flew off to their rest in the York gums; when even the children ceased for a while their various noises and seemed to listen to the approach of night. Could she ever exchange this for ... what else, what other life could surpass pleasures such as this? If only her Harry were at her side, thought Charlotte, she could still beat the worst the world might hand out to her. If only Harry would come home ...

At such times as these, with Charlotte's attention lost to her, Catherine might busy herself with Tamar-the-last, or be found supervising Tomos and turning his perfunctory washing into a miserably efficient cleansing of neck, ears, hands, legs and feet. Or just once or twice in these lonely months of the year, she had been known to join Charlotte on the front steps and silently, warily, sneak an arm around her shoulders — but not for long.

Sybil and Sophie's return from the seaside was a great diversion on Lower Meliot farm. The girls were delivered home from the Northam train by hired trap, Aunty Gem having escorted the children from Fremantle.

In a flurry of wild embraces, Gemima Capstock and her charges were soon settled back into the nest, feted with attention and sharing with Charlotte, Catherine and the boys not only stories of their holiday excitements but also the sweets and a fruit-cake the old lady had thoughtfully provided to accompany these happy moments.

The girls, their loving reunions with their human family effected, swept over the stables like a happy cloud in a sky of blue, refreshing themselves at the stable water trough, splashing, talking to the wise old team horses, feeding a little purloined-into-pockets stale bread to the poultry, stroking Matilda the house-cow, helping Garibaldi search for mice among the bags of stored grain — then climbing to the top of the haystack.

So it was that from this high vantage point Sybil and Sophie were first to spot the lone rider entering the bottom paddock from Busby's way. The view of this route was obscured

from the house by a huge rock outcrop which, too, was often used by the children as a famous castle, a desert island, a fell prison or a royal dais — depending on their mood and the season.

Approaching, soon to appear from around the corner of the stone barn, could only be ... yes, it was! Daddy! Quick!

Two blurry figures, clothes and hair streaming, raced across the intervening ground then, propped like suspicious animals testing the wind and waited breathlessly.

The unsuspecting rider, thinking his re-entry into the lives of his loved ones was as yet undetected, his imagination filling his mind with a picture of its own concoction, thus confronted was as surprised as was his saddle horse, which made to rear suddenly out of its somnolent mood.

Harry was out of the saddle in a trice and met his girls halfway across the space that had separated them. Hugs, kisses, squeals of delight and tears of joy and questions followed under the sceptical, wary eyes of the horse which bravely stood its ground, nostrils flared, ears forward, muscles flexed for flight or defence, whichever impulse came first. The thunderous hoofings and display neighing of the team horses come to the railings to investigate the newcomer soon diverted the saddle horse's previous alarm to this, for it, a more cogent presence.

With an arm around each of the girls, and theirs around him Harry was borne away to the house as if he were some uncomplaining, living trophy from a day outing.

That night, Tamar's position moved to second-last-elect with the wild release of his parents' dammed-up passions, Catherine and the children slept soundly and even Gemima Capstock amidst her adopted family had sweeter dreams than she had known for years. Harry was back. For once again, there was a father in the house and the darkness seemed less threatening and the sounds of the bush less frightening. They were all safe. Safe.

Gemima Capstock had never experienced a grain harvest. She thought she would accept Harry's invitation to stay on at the farm as long as she liked. The idea appealed to her adventurous spirit, which was still with her nor ever deserted her. It was the same spirit that had taken her out of that little Cornish south-coast fishing village crammed into a crevice-like fold between the steepes falling down to the ocean and had landed her on the sandy rim of this huge landscape.

Age was not her concern. Gemima, if asked about it and whether she should not be considerate of her years, would have answered that ‘... like everyone else in this world, I will live until I die and there is an end to it — take that how you will.’

At “a little more than my allotted span” Gemima was still fit and, perhaps more vitally necessary for her survival, was happily content within herself. She, and at first, her niece Rosa, had made for herself a life in which she was not perfectly happy — had her Reggie been still with her, life would have been that. Hers was a life that satisfied her, was comfortable, that pleased her. It was a life for which she counted herself fortunate.

Charlotte, then, had good reason to be entirely satisfied. Not only was the love of her life at this moment striding the boards of home, his presence was at the hearth of her soul. All her children were again about her, and the mother figure upon whom she had relied as anchor for years was in her kitchen turning out the sort of meals that until the old lady’s reappearance had been but a tantalizing memory of yesteryear.

The days were long, now, and the heat was intensifying. The wheat in the field had turned nut-brown. The plump grain-filled ears were ready. The laborious business of harvest was about to begin. Harry had risen at four in the morning to feed the team horses. By nine, the straw would be brittle and would cut easily, once the sun was upon it. The new-fangled harvester was but a dream to Harry. If ever he could afford one, he’d have such a machine in a flash. But until then, the old stripper would have to suffice.

In a corner of the paddock, beneath the shade of a sprawling eucalypt, Harry had set up the winnowing machine driven by a huge, cumbersome three and a half horsepower oil engine mounted on four iron wheels — a portable marvel of its age, so the sales brochure had proclaimed it to be, that needed, so Harry and others could testify to, an eight-horsepower team to pull it across a sandy or muddy field — if it could be kept upright.

Charlotte was in charge of the thresher, once Harry had started the engine. The heavy sacks of grain produced in the operation he would stack ready for loading each time he brought more stripped ears of wheat to the thresher. Sybil and Sophie milled about, feeding the thresher or playing games in the cocky-chaff, before bagging up the separated husks which was their allocated task. Charlotte would keep up the supply of wheat ears to the thresher when the girls’ efforts waned, and sew up the filled bags of chaff when ever she could. She looked forward to the two hours between seven and nine in the morning when, in the crisp air, she and Harry would work side by side bag-sewing, alone, before the girls

dawdled into the paddock from their late breakfast. Charlotte knew she was pregnant again. The thought of another child did not bother her, although she had hoped that hers and Harry's resolve that Tamar should be their last would not be disappointed. She had been so overjoyed to see him, to hold him, to have him again inside her. What other result than a natural one might she have expected? Five reproductions of his blood was not too many, Charlotte thought, and found herself actually looking forward to the addition.

The harvest was soon over, the grain either sold to the agent or stored in the stone barn. Sheep were in the stubble, and the team turned loose again, once the engine and the other machinery was put to rest under whatever cover the big York gums by the stone barn effected. The summer had begun in earnest.

CHAPTER Thirteen

An overnight journey by train traversing two-hundred odd rail miles punctuated with tea and pie shop stops for the temperate and close-by Railway Hotels for the rest, brought Mother and me to our rural destination at around five-thirty in the morning. Everyone needs the experience of being set down in the wilderness with no more assurance of location than a sign on a silent, unattended railway station and thus situated, of watching the relative comfort of one's late railway carriage being dragged away into the all-encircling darkness. All one's sphincters seem to give way at once.

At fourteen, it is not an easy thing to smoke in public with anything like aplomb. Even smoking in a school lavatory is poorly regarded by the mature on-looker. Only recently had the free world of the adult been extended to me. Now I could puff away my pocket money, if and when I had any, in that gloriously insecure period of self-determination that follows compulsory schooling, without guilt if only I could achieve the poise and composure requisite for true enjoyment of the sense-provoking weed. I withdrew my ounce-packet of Whiteoak tobacco from my shirt pocket and rolled a thin, thin gasper.

No band, no reception committee, no town crier nor civic dignitary at hand to greet and entertain us, Mother, Brandy and I had recourse to nothing better than to sit on the slatted, station bench seat and brood upon the exigencies of fate until the dawn arose behind the goods shed and threw her golden mantle over our predicament. The naked light of morn merely stirred the empty pit behind my navel. Brandy, haunched beside me, fleas at rest, yawned ostentatiously, looked at me expectantly and, at my lack of response, sank head on paws and rolled his eyes rather stupidly. Mother glanced at the clock suspended from the roof over the sign "Stationmaster", looked about her apprehensively, advised me to "go for a walk if you're cold", took out her library book and read.

This impasse was resolved when the Stationmaster emerged unexpectedly from somewhere within and behind us to enquire, in effect, what the devil we three were doing there. Some conversation passed between Mother and the man of which I took little notice. A goods train screeched and grizzled to a halt on the line opposite. Trucked in its rake of wagons were some sheep: animals quite foreign to Brandy, who didn't quite know what to do about them if, indeed, anything should be. In a quandary, Brandy stalked towards the sheep a few paces; stopped, uncertain, looked back at me for verification, ignored my signal to cease, dropped to a hunting position and began to drag himself towards the source of his fascination — which

would have been fine, had there been any long grass about. On the bitumened station platform, even Brandy must have felt as he looked: ludicrously obvious because, wearing a face even more sheepish than the sheep, he gave up following his instinctive passion and returned to my side where he tried to appear as inconspicuous as a red setter-sized dog ever could, clearly feeling foolish, a state he maintained until the memory of his ham performance faded from his mind.

* * * * *

At the crossroads, just beyond the thicket, past Jensen's, Mr Brady in his one-room school with its attached minute living quarters was preparing his battle lines in readiness for the new school term. A searing north wind blowing for two days already made even the school desks intolerably hot to the touch. The water tank was dry, its contents apparently stolen during Mr Brady's absence over the holidays. Harry Coates, to whom the young teacher had appealed, said he would bring water, shortly.

On Lower Meliot farm, Harry was mending a hole that had appeared in the side of the portable tank he used to transport water whenever it was needed around the farm. He was working on the empty tank already loaded onto the dray parked in the south-facing lean-to against the stone barn, away from the wind.

It was hot. It was airless. Perspiration flowed freely. Harry, like everyone else on days like this felt sluggish, lethargic. He had to force himself to work and to concentrate on the job in hand.

In the house, below the barn, Charlotte, Tamar-the-last and, for once, Tomos, were sleeping, their systems stopped in blissful rest after one of Gemima's "lunches".

Sybil and Sophie, as usual, were happily playing out another of their all-absorbing fantasies in the hay shed. Earlier, Harry had caught sight of a pink-skirted figure on top of the hay, and another in white, tip-toeing about the base of the stack and had smiled to himself. The girls were at it again, he thought, and once more marvelled at his children's capacity for play, contrasting them with his remembered self at their ages. Memories of the mine, of loading skips in the dark tunnels a hundred fathoms below ground level shattered his peace. He felt suddenly tired, sat down in the body of the wagon and rested his back against the tank. He saw the mine again — something that had left him alone for he couldn't remember how long. He saw the rock in candle-light slowly crumbling before his eyes, felt again the clammy atmosphere, heard only the silence and the intermittent splintering of granite, the creaking of the roof in the tiny confines of earthly space left to

him and the physical pain of the light when his rescuers at last broke through to him. Then Harry saw Shaddick. He saw Butler offering him a way out of that life which by a miracle had been restored to him. He saw the greed in the man's eyes, saw in the wretched man's eyes that expression of triumph when he, Harry Coates, elected to turn tail and run with his ticket and some passage money to Australia in his pocket.

Harry was suddenly awake. What was it? What had happened? God! The blow lamp! A glance told him the story. The neglected, still-burning paraffin blow lamp he had been using to heat the soldering iron for the repair to the tank had rested too close to the wooden side of the wagon. The dry, brittle, weathered wood had ignited — but worse! Fire that had swirled aimlessly in the partial vacuum caused by the sheltering stone barn wall had found an out at last and, with the wind behind it, was racing towards the hay shed. There, in its path, as though transfixed, was Sybil, screaming, not knowing which way to run.

By some super human effort, Harry, having leapt from the wagon, managed to race around the perimeter of the fire and snatch the child to safety before the hay shed and its contents seemed to explode.

The hammering of his chest he thought was his heart stopped the moment he heard that shriek. The child in his arms became limp. He looked down, not understanding. Surely not ... Surely Sybil was not ... Harry breathed easier. Sybil began to sob: painful, choking sobs.

'Its all right, sweetheart, its all right,' he said struggling with his own emotion. He was still shocked, hardly able to believe what was happening. The fire would burn itself out, he hoped, once it hit the fallowed ground between home and Busbys.

He calmed, until Sybil wailed 'Sophie, Daddy, Sophie! Daddy!'

Harry looked at the girl, horror-struck, looked at the inferno before him, remembered that terrible shriek both he and Sybil had heard at once.

'No! No! Not Sophie! Me, the farm, everything! But not Sophie!'

He knew there was nothing to be done. The hay shed roof collapsed just as Charlotte carrying Tamar-the-last arrived on the scene. Harry couldn't tell her — to his shame left her to guess at what had happened, even when in her distress she screamed at him 'Sophie, where is she? Harry, what have you done with Sophie?'

He still could say nothing. It was Sybil who spoke for him.

Gemima left Lower Meliot Farm in May after a stay of a fortnight had lengthened to more than six months. The old lady went away alone — alone, for the first time in years. A

new season's rains had begun. Already, fresh green covered the paddocks. She would be back for the birth, she said, though in honesty she privately doubted it. The children had completed another term at Mr Brady's little school. Every day, even Mr Brady felt the loss, he said, just as did Sybil, carelessly growing up, a mood of chronic melancholia blighting her waking moments. Tomos was unchanged, still easily absorbed by mechanical things, always making drawings of his inventions and inviting Mr Brady's opinions as to their feasibility, reported the teacher.

'Harry has developed a cough. "Smoke-inhalation, perhaps." the doctor said. "But it has gone on too long for that. The man has been a miner, hasn't he? More likely it's phthisis." And Charlotte has changed — understandably, of course. The poor girl isn't looking forward to having another baby, now. It seems as though losing Sophie like that has made her lose interest — almost as though she's no longer prepared to devote herself to anyone. For fear of losing them? I don't know. Poor girl. I wish I could have stayed on to help. But then I thought maybe they — Charlotte and Harry — had had enough of an old boiler like myself being around the place. You never can tell what anyone's thinking if they only speak when spoken to and then often in single words. So I decided to come home for a bit. I'm sure Charlotte will write if she needs me.'

'Well, anyway. Aunt Gem, Josh and I are happy to see you home again. We thought we had lost you to Charlotte. We were so sorry. We read about the fire in the paper. Poor little girl. Josh said a prayer that Sunday at service, saying how he hoped she did not suffer too long. What a terrible thing.'

Gemima could not bear to dwell on the child's death. 'Josh!' she exclaimed: 'How is my only nephew? Not a bishop yet?'

'Aunty Gem! Don't be mischievous! You know very well we don't have bishops in our church.'

Rosa's serious absorption in ecclesiastical affairs was becoming a disappointment to Gemima. The child was losing her sense of humour and seemed to admit no longer to the potential of the ridiculous. 'Next, Rosa, you will become pompous!'

'Now come on, Aunty Gem. Do you really think I followed you all this way to give up genuine free thinking? It's because you have left me alone with only my dear Josh to talk to for so long ... I am only an impressionable young girl, Aunty.'

The old lady laughed. ‘That’s better ... more like the lass I left behind me. I’m starving. Put on you hat and coat. We’re lunching at the Palace.’

‘Now there’s an invitation I can hardly refuse. We indigent clerics’ wives have a hard life, full of self-sacrifice — and covetousness. What else is there for us, on Joshua’s meagre income?’

‘Sob! Sob! Sob! ... Are you ready?’

‘“Beauty” as I hear is the latest exclamation used to express approval. Let’s go. Aunty Gem is back! Shall we take the train or go by river?’

‘The train, I think. It’s quicker. These days I should be counting my minutes.’

‘Aunty Gem!’

Not two months later, Gemima Capstock was saying farewell again to her dear Rosa and her husband. She had settled her affairs, sold her little apartment overlooking the river, from whose windows she, too, had watched ships come and go in the harbour. The rest of whatever life she had in her, she said, was going to a good cause — a statement which had excited the Reverend Joshua Samuels at first — until Gemima had added that the best good cause she could think of was Charlotte Coates and her family, a family which surely must be on the verge of disintegration. Charlotte’s baby was due. Gemima was keeping her promise, after all. She would be back for the birth.

‘But isn’t there a girl ... Catherine? She must be able to help, surely. Who is she, anyway? We know she sometimes calls Harry “Dad”. But is she really his daughter?’

‘I surely don’t know anything about that, dear Josh. But yes, Catherine is still on the farm. Running it, I’d say, with Harry being so ill.’

CHAPTER Fourteen

The block Father had been allocated had no buildings. These were to come over the next two years. Much was on Father's mind. Negotiating a place for himself among his neighbours did not come easily to him. Perhaps it was this preoccupation that caused him, when selecting our house-site, to overlook the provision of one very elementary service. Soon enough, a basic prefabricated house was built on the chosen spot. From the outset and for the next eleven years, carting domestic water to it was a continual chore. In return for this inconvenience, we had the view.

The view was something that came to light after Father had literally torn limb from limb the splendid eucalypts which had, until his advent, grown magnificent in perfect innocence, awaiting his assault. Demolition of the trees was effected with the assistance of the Japanese Navy, its contribution being absolutely indirect, of course. In idle moments following his discharge from the Air Force, Father had whiled away his time and demobilization pay at Military Disposal sales. At one such sale he had been particularly attracted to a certain lot consisting of two hundred yards of inch-diameter steel cable. As usual, he was at that time, too, an advanced thinker and became the owner of this rope without opposition. For months it had joined the other junk accumulating, doing nothing except from time to time snagging the skin of a passing leg or pricking the finger of anyone who rashly thought of disturbing it. This rope, we learned — as often as we could bear it — had helped support the submarine net submerged across Fremantle harbour to protect Yank ships from sneak attack during the war. Now, one end tied to a spreading limb of a specimen-grand York gum, the other to the drawbar of a Fordson tractor with Father at the controls, it was bent on making "the view" in our thousand-acre paddock ...

It being Sunday and for some reason Sundays being observed as such, even in the most isolated regions safe from spot checks by the clergy, farm work per se was suspended at our place, too. Father had sung a hymn or two in company with the morning service on the radio and was fidgeting about as, it being my turn, I listened to "Morning Music". Cup of tea? No water! 'Let's go and build the tank,' said Father. So tank building commenced.

* * * * *

Tamar-the-last was not displaced. Charlotte's pregnancy ended in a still-birth. Practical Gemima thought that event was for the best — even she who had so longed for a baby of

her own so long ago. At the time of the dead child's delivery, though, it was difficult to determine who was more distressed — the mother, the midwife, or Gemima.

The enormity of her latest calamity did not overwhelm Charlotte. When Harry had suggested that she go to the midwife this time instead of having that woman attend to her at home, Charlotte had agreed. She would have agreed to any suggestion put to her, she thought. The loss of Sophie had left her drained and suspended from the present by the almost unbelievable tragedy. That such a thing should happen to her, that one more of her loved ones should be taken from her was an incomprehensible act. Hadn't she already suffered in the worst imaginable way through the loss first of her mother and then of her father? Shouldn't the rest of her life be lived in a state of amnesty from any further disaster? So sure had Charlotte been that she had paid in human misery whatever dues life could further demand of her that even the anxieties which had attacked her during Harry's later absences she had dismissed as being her simple weakness. The loss of the baby was to Charlotte in her present mood just another blow intended to stun, which fell upon an already barely conscious entity. She lay back on her pillows in the midwife's front room in a sort of mental limbo waiting, uncaring, unfeeling — those about her hoping, imploring, waiting for the light to return to her eyes.

Harry reached town in the late afternoon and spent an hour with Charlotte before the approaching dusk dictated his need to return to Lower Meliot farm while there was still light to see his way. As he drove his buggy east on Fitzgerald Street past the Shamrock hotel, in silent procession, one behind the other, shambled the miserable remnants of a once-proud Aboriginal tribe now in ragged European cast-off clothing returning to a small patch of ground north of the town-site gazetted as a reserve for Natives. Harry's contact with these people had been negligible and except for absently placing the occasional small coin in an outstretched lighter-shaded palm of a black, claw-like hand, he had given them no consideration. Harry, like so many, was not a new settler in this district. Upon the consciences and the shoulders of the real pioneers — like Johnson, perhaps — rested the responsibility for the displacement of this country's oldest inhabitants. The Shaddicks of this world driven by the needs of acquisitiveness, of greed, self-aggrandisement and covetousness must accept whatever blame there was generated for their decimation of the tribes. Harry now, like many placed in similar circumstances and held in the bondage of economic demand must perform within its constraints according to a set of rules imposed by trade — an imported set of behaviours upon whose logic his life and that of his family

depended. Men and women such as he and Charlotte, revel as they might in the changed physical environment of their new country, were still as beholden to a top-dog managed society and were being ruled here in Australia just as surely and just as selfishly as ever they had been in the lands of their birth. Here, whoever rose to the top of the heap quickly adopted the mores and values of those they had purportedly despised as they or their forefathers sailed away from home. Maybe future generations of Australians would see to it that the iniquities of a transposed European society might be abolished, and actually act upon that vision, Harry thought, as he watched the miserable remnants of the country's defeated original human inhabitants pass by.

Sophie's death had changed Harry. Where formerly he had taken a simple, uncomplicated view of life and had dwelt pretty much on the surface of its tides, with the loss of his daughter who had died, he felt, by his own hand, he began to be aware of the deeper currents sweeping him along. There was no escape, he realized, from the experiences of his early life, from his other life during the formative years he had spent in Cornwall. Cornwall and all that happened there was Harry's past, he knew now. His years in Fremantle with Cecil Fox, his relationship with Margaret, with Catherine, his disappointed dreams of Rosa and his life with Charlotte he could trace back to Shaddick, to the dismal tin mine in which he had started work in order to feed himself. What was he doing today but farming, shearing away from home, in order to feed himself? In Cornwall he had lost his peace of mind, his self-respect, in the process of making a living. Here, in Australia, for his past life still in thrall, he had had to pay in Sophie's blood his life's mortgagee's call and in return still he was receiving nothing more than a meagre living.

A creeping sadness had overtaken him. It had spoiled his fine vision of himself as landowner and had negated the building pride in himself in his efforts to sustain himself and his family within the local agricultural community. More frequently nowadays visions of his origins, of his toiling, uncomplaining Da crippled by work yet working himself to death; of his Ma in her mean hovel of a kitchen or on the mine, breaking rocks for the stamps and saving, scrimping, sacrificing whatever small chance she had to rest in order to send young Tommy to learn from Mr Sedges. And Belinda? What of her? Who knows? At least, thought Harry, had he stayed at home, worked at anything if Shaddick had had him black-listed on the mines, surely he could have done something to ease the load at home.

In such a mood, Harry's depression knew no boundaries and would plunder his consciousness without mercy.

Harry looked on with some compassion now as the pathetic file of unhappy black people dragged doggedly on. Were any of them crying inwardly as he was, he wondered? And Charlotte? How must she feel? Her losses to date had been far greater than his own. The realization that Charlotte, too, must be suffering as he was only served to deepen his sense of melancholy. And his thinking was complicated still further by the presence, no, the existence of Catherine. If Harry truly loved anyone, it was Catherine, the child who had grown so much with him in this different land, the child whose mind he alone had largely shaped and whose mind was so much a part of his own. Yet his Catherine was an element of guilt which always invaded his regard and relationships, no matter how close he held Charlotte and the other children. Apart from Catherine, it had been Sophie whom Harry had allowed nearest his inner spiritual self and that relaxation of his guard had ended so tragically. Knitting up the rent in his emotional demeanour at this time seemed to him to be an insuperable task.

Harry drew up outside the re-named Farmers' Own Hotel in order to allow the disconsolate, ragged procession to overtake him. For the first time he really wanted to look at these people, recognizing in them souls kindred to his own.. They were of all ages. There were naked skinny little boys and girls with round, starved stomachs and stick-like legs, old men and younger ones some of them barely decent by European standards, men with dirty, stained white beards, mature women who saw no virtue in covering their pendulous breasts, old crones with empty flaps of skin on their chests like bladders sucked dry, and occasionally a prime young buck or two still with a glint of defiance in his eyes.

Perhaps fifty men, women and children filed by. Now and then one broke from formation to accost a passer-by with outstretched hand and on receiving a coin or nothing limped or strode or shuffled on in silence. The parade was notable for its silence. Under different circumstances in another place and dressed for the event, its members might have been mistaken for a group of mourners following a funeral cortege — a group of straggling unwashed miners and their sons such as had followed in procession the body of Harry's Da to the burial ground.

In the failing light of late afternoon, Harry shook out the reins and let the pony raise a trot as he headed for home, where without doubt Gemima Capstock would, on sight of the approaching sulky, be dishing up the evening meal and Catherine with the children would be waiting for his news of Charlotte.

Some days later returning from her stay with the midwife at Northam, and sitting on the high seat beside Grizzly Cullen, Charlotte felt a sense of relaxation flood over her as she first caught sight of Lower Meliot farm. Whatever the farmhouse might have represented to her when she was away from it, now, again, it was home. Maybe it was a depleted home but, Charlotte realized with some sense of reassurance, it was where her true heart lay and, of course, it was where her love was to be found.

Grizzly hired out himself, his two horses and his wagonette for general purposes besides hauling goods. He was genuinely happy to be of service, especially to Charlotte Coates whom he secretly admired for her apparent fortitude — and for the quality of her tea and cakes that she had served up to him on his countless trips to and past Lower Meliot farm.

Gemima had written a note to say that Catherine would drive the sulky into town to pick her up when she was ready to come home, Harry's chest being what it was. But Charlotte had preferred to make her own arrangements. The thought of waiting about a moment longer than necessary in Nurse Robinson's maternity home abounding with healthy babies and ecstatic mothers and their delighted relatives soon became more than she could willingly stand.

Once more a balmy, early spring morning displayed the beauties of the day, the sunshine mantling the trees, the green paddocks, the fences — everything — in that special golden light. The air was sweet and moist still, without the dry harshness yet to follow. Flashing flights of green parrots flew noisily into the trees, and the accompanying jangle of the harness, the clip-clop of the horses' feet, the constant grinding of the soft road surface in contact with the iron-shod wheels, the smell of the grass, of horse-sweat, of the yellow wattle, was a magical tonic to a saddened mind.

Suddenly, as the wagonette ran down past Jensen's, there it was before her: the familiar track, the paddocks, the big mail-box beside the front gate bearing the irregular lettering that Harry had laboriously inscribed upon it in white paint: "Lower Meliot Farm". It was a name he had thought appropriate, he had explained, Australia being well and truly under High Meliot, his home village in Cornwall. And there, among the straggling gum trees was the homestead, beyond it the big stone barn, the stables and, further towards the horse paddock was the patch of ground where the hay shed used to be. Charlotte burst into tears.

Grizzly Cullen, beside her, rudely roused from his accustomed state into which he had sunk, that on the road between deliveries bordered on the unconscious, seemed to awake

with a start. Even Old Charlie, the lead horse, checked his step. Delphine, Charlie's partner, taking this to mean "Stop", did so, bringing the whole show to a halt.

With tearful passengers, Grizzly was not at his best. He simply held the reins in front of him, as though awaiting advice to proceed, daring a sidelong glance at the lady, otherwise giving an impression of arrested motion any vaudeville mime would have been proud of. The weather according to Grizzly was still unpredictable as in equinoctial times it can be. With him it was thus still winter flannel season, with waistcoat buttoned securely. There he sat, tangled beard streaming out from under his bowler hat, one foot thrust forward, braced against the head-board, an ear and an eyebrow cocked, awaiting his instructions.

Self-consciously, after the first wave of uncontrollable emotion had passed over her and she had recovered from its effects a little, Charlotte, glancing at her companion surreptitiously, took in poor Grizzly's situation at once. 'Please drive on, Mr Cullen. I'm sorry,' she said rather uncertainly, wiping her eyes with one of Gemima's lace-trimmed handkerchiefs withdrawn from her sleeve.

'Understood, m'dear. Understood. Gee-up, Charlie!' Grizzly snapped the reins unnecessarily. Old Charlie and Delphine were already under way by this time.

CHAPTER Fifteen

Inside a growing water tank, acting as dolly-boy is about as inspiring as the job of broom-boy in a shearing shed. But each task on a farm, however onerous it may seem at the time of performance, has about it the blessed feature of temporariness. Mercifully, the last arc of the tank was secured in place before I suffered permanent hearing loss. Soldering the joints then having been completed, some means of testing our creation had to follow. A "temporary" earth ring put down in "the garden" just outside the kitchen door served as foundation upon which the tank was soon to be seen in position. Efficacious magic incantations precluded water from leaking out of any of the soldered joints so we discovered, on first filling, so by Sunday evening Chez Crawley boasted its own reserve of crystal-clear water carted in from a natural bore about three quarters of a mile distant.

Imagine the bliss when, coming in from a heavy morning's super spreading, a pre-lunch sluice from a bowl of water drawn from the tank was first experienced. A near-by stump made a convenient wash-stand and there I picture Father throwing suds over his hairy shoulders as, with the vigour of a true romantic, he curses the inventor of cast chain links, fertilizer broadcasters, public service bureaucrats, family relationships — in fact anything coming to mind. No bird in a bath ever made better use of a puddle than did Father of his mid-day bowl by that tank.

The following Sunday morning I awoke to the sound of chopping. "A wand'ring minstrel I, a thing of ... Get out of the way, blasted cat! Leave that meat alone!" Heavy stamping of feet followed, then much clattering, succeeded by a shot from Father's Lithgow twenty-two. I sprang out of bed, fully prepared to say the last rites for Bennett but, instead of a dead or at least mortally-wounded cat, I saw a rather goofy-looking Father offering a dead twenty-eight to Mother's pet. Father then hoisted the sheep carcass hanging from the tree a foot or two higher, out of leaping range, and gave me the rifle to carry back to the house while he resumed his wood-chopping. I asked no questions; but observed the copper full of water as I passed it in the yard, and a fire already kindled under it. I hastened inside to hide my best shirt, the only respectable upper garment left to me after two months of Father's laundry work. He boiled everything, shrunk most things and was an unwitting fashion leader, being twenty-five years ahead of the times, producing batik-like coloured bed-sheets, floral work shirts and underwear of indiscriminate shades almost weekly with very little effort apart from chopping the wood for the fire.

My best shirt was not to be found under the bed where I had left it. I was too late. My search for my lovely shirt ended when Father drew my attention to a steaming, colour-less blob on the end of his copper-stick. "This it?" he asked laconically. "Yes!" I said stiffly. "What do you want a best shirt for?" he asked again, laughing: "You're a farmer, now."

Becoming a farmer began in earnest with my first ploughing and seeding. It also marked Father's retirement from the realities of making a living, in many ways. Hereafter, with me full of my seventeen year-old's youthful enthusiasms for world-beating on the agricultural front, Father felt himself relieved of further economic anxiety and took up water-divining in a big way. "Dowsing" he called it, an interest he pursued pretty much to the exclusion of all voluntary practicality until the end of his life.

* * * * *

1.

At home, Gemima for a time had been as a captain in charge of a rudder-less ship. The storms of shock and despair had shaken the Coates edifice of family badly, had sprung its seams and left its survivors just clinging to its unfastened rigging. Repairs were vital to its survival. Catherine wandered about the place zombie-like, attending to the animals' needs as would an automaton, never speaking, straight-faced, appearing unbidden to the meal table, eating, then silently leaving. Sybil, too, had to be watched constantly. Gemima, who knew instinctively she would lose the girl, determined to save her and nursed her, insisted that she cry and at first slept for nights in the leather visitors chair drawn up to the fire with the child in her arms. Tomos was different. He was easily co-opted into being Gemima's helper and adviser and this way was diverted from introspective thoughts. Tamar-the-last's needs were largely taken care of by his brother thereafter, although the boy was abnormally quiet during his mother's absence. Catherine — Ah! Catherine ... what was she to do about this young lady?

The un-tiring efforts of this remarkable old woman had already gone a long way towards helping the depleted family's sorrowing individuals re-form their relationships toward each other and to their permanently affected environment. Charlotte's worst fear had been that she would be unable to cope with more misery than her own on her return to her sad household.

Some miracle, however, had seen fresh flowers being placed on the table, a multi-coloured “Welcome home, Mum” banner being hung from the mantelpiece, even though she was returning unannounced — and there was mutton roasting in the oven!

‘We knew you were coming!’ It was Tomos who gave the pot away. ‘Aunt Gem brought her new binocular things with her — like telescopes — the ones she used to use to look at the ships in the harbour, she says.’

‘Yes! We saw you stop up near Jensen’s, even. The air’s so clear!’ Gemima laughingly admitted.

Charlotte dared not look at Sybil, at first. The child stood at Gemima’s side, very solemn, withdrawn, clearly alienated from her past, nothing of their mother-and-daughter relationship evident. Charlotte’s heart sank. But again, Gemima’s magnanimity won the day, when she courageously surrendered the love-tie she and Sybil had developed between them and gently pushed her “baby” forward, instructing her softly: ‘Go to your mother, child.’

Charlotte was overcome by the warmth of their reunion. Both she and Sybil wept in each other’s embrace perhaps because no such embrace between them had happened since the fire. Gemima wept, too, and for good measure, little Tamar-the-last joined in the general lachrymosity rather than be left standing in a rather insecure limbo unattended for a minute. Tomos played with Gemima’s binocular things. Catherine was away riding in the two-hundred acres.

It was a strange sensation for Charlotte to be resuming the role to which she had become accustomed during Harry’s long absences from the farm. She had been away for nearly a month, for most of that time confined to one room shared with three other women — all strangers to her at first.

In the four weeks she had spent as a special case with Nurse Robinson, all those years she had lived until this moment seemed to have been driven out of focus and had blurred. The important things in her life there where she had been confined at her doctor’s insistence had been the routine things, like meal-times and visiting hours — not that she had visitors often. Harry, Tomos, Sybil, Gemima with the little lad, and sometimes Catherine would come in on Sundays. The Methodist minister called once a week, and Mrs Busby and her brood descended on her one Wednesday afternoon. The midwife’s attention was constant when she was needed, but grew less as the days after the birth went by.

Harry's mood of despondency rarely lifted, these days. With Charlotte's return to the farm his old spirits seemed to revive and for a day or so it appeared that the black clouds of morose-ness beneath which he had laboured in recent months might lift. In barely a week, Harry was to leave again on his seasonal shearing run, yet given his physical and mental condition, the prospect of long months away from home, away from the well-spring of his misery, was becoming insupportable. His mourning was incomplete. There was no other thing in the world which he could face squarely at its own valuation without an accompanying image of horror. Always, everywhere, he saw the blazing haystack and heard that ghastly, devastating shriek that, for him, had preceded his last moment of earthly sanity. The devil from the mine with whom he had battled for those days and nights deep below in the impenetrable darkness of a premature grave had reached up into the air and was dragging him down again, again into the fetid silences of that disgusting tomb. No one could help Harry now — not Charlotte, nor Catherine or any other of his children. Often, in his more lucid moments he saw his young brother Thomas and his sister Belinda and thought of his Ma and Pa. Shaddick, the mine-owner, appeared to him once, but Harry ignored the man, though he did spit forcibly when Butler who was Shaddick's secretary appeared briefly in his imagination. The green hills of his native land in summer sometimes consoled him and he would in his mind's eye trace the flight of a bird against the cliffs, while the sea below in gentle mood enwrapped the jutting headland in silver collars of foam. Entranced, Harry would sit beneath a tree in Johnson's garden, his eye enraptured as the speck of orange light advanced across the sea, across the shore-line, mounted the cliff face and descended upon him blazing, screaming, burning, shrieking, shrieking 'Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!' Then, Charlotte would find him, kneel before him, draw his head down upon her breast and together they would cry so softly.

Try as she may, Charlotte was unable to console her beloved Harry and, more and more, she was left alone with this mounting new sorrow added to her own. Where, however, the man declined under the accumulated misery that was his constant assailant, the woman seemed able to cope with her oppression, even to overcome it and to take pleasure in whatever else remained hers.

Since this period of gloom had settled on Lower Meliot Farm, Gemima could not remember Catherine volunteering one word to anybody. Never one to let the grass grow

under her feet, once the idea of a possible solution to Catherine's loneliness had struck, so had Gemima.

A note delivered to Mr Brady by Tomos — carried to the little school above Jensen's as usual by Catherine who drove the trap twice a day up to the crossroads — had resulted in Mr Brady bicycling down to Lower Meliot farm the next Saturday, for mid-day dinner. With great satisfaction, Gemima saw his eyes straying towards Catherine more than once during the meal, although his one attempt to engage her in conversation bore no fruit other than an almost-morose monosyllable in reply. Gemima's silent assessment of her stratagem told her that it was a worthwhile opening and that a full-scale campaign, well-directed, could possibly achieve a desirable outcome. She would persist, though she fore-saw it as being a long-term operation, one unlikely to yield a quick result.

Before Harry had become too sick he had, all thoughts of the shearing run abandoned, raised himself out of his misery long enough to drive over to Busby's, whose property adjoined Lower Meliot's southern boundary. What understanding he had come to with Angus and Robert Busby only became apparent, later, when Catherine had rushed into Harry's sick room to ask what were the Busbys doing harrowing the fallow beyond the horse-paddock.

Harry had taken the girl's hands in his and croaked out his explanation as best he could: 'I didn't think I should leave it to you, lass. You'll have enough to do looking after the sheep and the shearing here and the fences, without worrying yourself with the crops. Busbys'll do it for yer, tell Charlotte. They'll take half and you give 'em the seed and fertiliser, will you?'

2.

A ghost-like figure appeared in the kitchen, where Charlotte was preparing the evening meal. Gemima was resting.

'Charlotte. Come with me?'

The woman looked up. 'Where?'

'To the hill. Catherine's harnessed Daisy into the sulky for me. We could slip away for an hour or two.'

'Are you well enough, Harry?'

‘It’s warm. And besides Aunty Gem will watch over things.’

‘Aunty Gem always does.’

‘So you’ll come?’

‘Was there any doubt I’d let you out of my sight, you silly man?’

‘Then let’s go.’

To the west of the home paddocks there is a flat-topped rise from which the land falls away to the east, affording a view over the fields and far across the huge valley that is banked on the other side by more hills — hills that extend into the blue haze of the far distance. This was Harry’s “thinking spot”. Sometimes on a Sunday afternoon conducive to meditation or review this miner-cum-farmer might have been found here sitting alone, his eyes fixed on some remote aspect of the long vista, in motionless contemplation.

Today though would be different. Today, he would not be alone. Now that he felt himself to be no longer the sole conscious arbiter of his waking thoughts, with the lines of fracture beginning to occlude his reasoning, combined with his almost continual coughing, Harry knew that the limits of his life could be measured in weeks. Today could even be the one when the oppressive blackness of the pit would overwhelm him at last — today, when again he could be called on to fight for his life. Only now it would be different.

He almost smiled, and would have done, had he the energy, as he thought how he would greet the dark-clad messenger who once before had appeared to him in that awful loneliness. This time, he would and ask that grim figure what had kept him from his business so long.

It was with a sense of calmness that would never have succeeded before that Harry realized he possessed no will to resist, any more. The fight to live had left him. His defences had collapsed. It was time for others to move up to the line and to take his place. Today? Well, today at least, he would not be alone. Today he would remain near to Charlotte. Today he would bring Charlotte. If the light for him was to ebb today, Charlotte would be the one to hold him as that long night descended.

‘Charlotte. I’ve not been all that I should have been to you.’

‘Harry Coates! What nonsense! In all these years you have never disappointed me. Remember? I was the one who did the tracking! I was always more satisfied with the man I caught — even though I may have had only a share of him at any one time.’

‘Don’t tease, Charlotte. Not now. I may not have disappointed you but I have surely disappointed myself. Ever since we married I have felt that I have not been able to love you as you deserve to be loved.’

‘Harry!’

‘No, dearest Charlotte. Let me speak. I feel I am a person who has lived three lives — first at home, with Ma, Da, Tom, and Belinda. Then in Fremantle, as if by accident with Cecil Fox and his strange family ... and then with you. Best of all, with you — that is, here ... until ...’

‘Don’t think any more, Harry. Sophie — well, Sophie perhaps had to happen. All things taken into account, perhaps we were at fault trying to stay on the farm. You away working most of the time, we girls and the children carrying on as though we could and would last forever. But if that was a mistake, we have paid for it enough already.’

‘It’s all too much, Charlotte. I can’t bear it.’

‘But you must, my dearest. We must all. We must go on. There is no ending. Only re-birth. Harry? Did you hear what I said, Harry?’

‘Hah! Then I’m an ear of wheat! It’ll be some rain that brings about my next sprouting!’
‘That’s better, Mr Harry Coates! Is that a smile I see?’

Harry’s soft laugh is cut short by a coughing fit. ‘Some ear,’ he croaks. ‘One ear that be sheddin’ his seeds damn fast ... moi luvver.’

‘Don’t come the Cornishman with me, sir ... Harry? Harry! Harry, I’m taking you home, Harry!. Home, Daisy’ she commands the horse as she slaps down the reins.

Throughout the succeeding days, Charlotte watches with misty eyes as her beloved mate progresses to his end. She doesn’t call the doctor again. Harry rouses himself from his torpor long enough to make a last visit to old Josh Pretty, though it is that visit which finishes him. A sudden rain squall catches him in his sulky unprepared as he makes his way back to his Lower Meliot Farm. He arrives home soaked to the skin and shivering with cold. In another twenty-four hours he is dead — Harry Coates is dead in the arms of the woman who has lived for him for all the years of her own life that she reckons as being important and worthwhile.

BOOK TWO**CHAPTER Sixteen****1.**

As she rode across the paddocks where the sheep grazed, Catherine could see the Busbys also on horseback in the wheat field. She supposed that the men were inspecting the crop, half of which for the sowing and harvesting it, they would take as their own. The remainder would become the property of Lower Meliot Farm — a quite customary share-cropping arrangement. No legal agreement ever covered such transactions. The parties' honourableness was presumed, between close neighbours.

Although the girl gave the wheat field a particularly wide berth, Robert Busby, the youngest of the brothers easily overtook her, since she had declined her first impulse to set her horse to a gallop. After all, she was the one more rightfully present on what was now Charlotte's land.

'Catherine! A word!' Robert Busby called when he got within hailing distance. 'I haven't seen you in weeks!' he panted, drawing close.

Catherine regarded him with affected impassivity. She couldn't stand the Busbys — either of them. They always wanted to talk. They made her feel uncomfortable. She was certain that whenever they spoke to her they were laughing at her. All she ever wanted now, since Harry died, was to be left alone.

'I was wondering, Catherine ... do you dance?'

Catherine shook her head.

'There's a dance on Saturday night at the hall, in town. You're not going, I suppose?'

She wished he would go away and leave her in peace. Would she ever go anywhere, with Robert Busby? Not likely! She sensed that there was about the man an almost overpowering aura of confidence, of virility, and it frightened her.

'You could come with us,' he persisted. He was baiting her. 'Our Ma and Rita — our whole family's going.'

Catherine stared into the distance, making no reply.

'Come on!' Robert Busby urged brightly, his face alight with something more than mischief. Catherine's continued silence emboldened him. 'You could wear one of Rita's dresses. She's got plenty,' he proposed in mock innocence.

He sat on his horse, one leg cocked on the pommel, a sardonic grin on his handsome face, then laughed uproariously when Catherine suddenly struck her mount with the loose end of her rein and galloped away from him. How much greater his success would have been had he seen her angry tears. She could imagine Robert regaling his brother Angus with the outcome of his sport with her. She could see them laughing at her humiliation, and cowered inwardly. Yet strangely, she felt, it was Harry she saw in the shadowy background of her thoughts and he, too, was smiling, as often she remembered he had whenever in her ignorance of any but himself she had acted foolishly in the presence of someone else.

Would she ever know peace again? Certainly not while the Busbys had right of access to Lower Meliot farm's acreage, Catherine thought — she whose own rights to enjoy Harry's land had now been defined in writing as, in effect, nil. Harry had made a will just a few weeks after he and Charlotte married. Now he was dead. Everything was Charlotte's. Nothing was contained in the document that could be construed as referring to herself. Catherine was legally penniless; homeless. She was a nobody and nobody's.

Catherine didn't know if she could forgive Harry, ever. Why he should have overlooked her, she could never imagine. If she were to survive, she must marry. What else was there for her? In a few years, youth would have deserted her. She would become an old maid, forever single and forever risking scorn and the derisive comments even of children. She would be childless in a community that rested secure solely upon its own fecundity. But whom should she marry? Who would want her? Who? Whom could she stand to have ... doing that to her? She certainly had no intention of becoming a Busby's brood mare. Mr Brady seemed rather nice. If only she had had some education, she might be his equal or, at least, be able to talk to the man ... Instead, whenever Catherine even thought of Hugh Brady the schoolteacher, she became tongue-tied ... and the more conscious of her inadequacies she became, the worse was her discomfort

Following this latest encounter with the Busbys, Catherine determined to be like Harry, to act as he had done and to help herself. She would try to forget the hurt her beloved friend — or father — had left her and to begin a new life of her own. The process would be long and undoubtedly it would be arduous; but with a light to guide her such as she had known, she was certain to succeed, no matter how long it took!

Little other outside assistance was available to Charlotte and had it not been for the presence of the capable Catherine in those early days, Lower Meliot Farm as such would

have fallen apart. That there was no man to whom she could turn really opened Charlotte's eyes to the girl's abilities and she, Catherine, coming face to face with her own worth at last now marked with indelible strokes her management of the farm. Tomos was a help and was prepared to work with his sister, following her lead, asking her advice, treating her as a senior partner in what became, as he saw it, a joint venture of theirs. The Busby boys as share-croppers were dispensed with — this was Catherine's proving. Had she failed to eject the Busbys then very likely she would have failed at all else. Their patronizing attitude towards her had been her nightmare, and she had approached the matter of terminating their involvement in Lower Meliot Farm in a funk of self-doubt and uncertainty.

Tomos was beside her when Robert Busby first began to laugh at her and question her authority in the matter, called her a "bastard spurt of old man Coates's prick" and made to walk away. It was Tomos who shouted at the young man in Catherine's defence. It was the sixteen-year old Tomos who induced in the minds of the Busbys an inkling that their time might be up. He and Catherine would be running Lower Meliot in future, Tomos shouted at the Busbys, and told them they were no longer welcome.

But it was Catherine who underlined her young brother's resolution when, earning Tomos's undying admiration, she fired a shot from her rifle into the mouldboard of the plough. The screaming sound the bullet made as it ricocheted off the steel plate was menacingly spectacular. Together, Catherine with her arm around Tomos's shoulders, in the other the smoking .22 calibre Browning, they watched and laughed as the Busby boys, cursing for all they were worth amidst much fist-shaking, mounted their horses and rode off homewards.

Charlotte had been visiting Mr Brady at the school, on a matter concerning her youngest, Tamar, so was unaware of Catherine's action in driving off the Busbys until regaled by the story of "how Catherine raised the siege at Lower Meliot Farm", as melodramatically retold by Tomos at the dinner table. Tamar was ecstatic and said he couldn't wait to hear Penny's version of the story. Gemima Capstock's old eyes glowed. Sybil was palely silent. Charlotte, however, was disbelieving. What had Catherine done? How would next season's crop be planted? Who would plough, seed and harrow? What had Catherine been thinking of?

Catherine was silent. She withdrew at once into that aloofness Charlotte knew only Harry had been able to penetrate. It was the Tomos who on seeing the effect of Charlotte's

questioning upon Catherine rose and moved around the table to stand beside the young woman.

‘Catherine did well, Mother. I was proud of her. The Busbys had to go. They should have gone last year. I am old enough now for the plough, Mother. With Catherine’s help, I shall plant the wheat. But I was not old enough, nor was I brave enough on my own, to stand up for you and the farm today. It was Catherine. Please don’t be angry with her — or me, Mother. We did what we did for the best.’

Charlotte was overwhelmed, yet the tears in her eyes were of pride. Tomos seemed to her to have grown into a man in the short few hours of her absence. For that moment, no questions of probability invaded her thoughts. Tomos sooner or later, if he were to be a real farmer, would have to take charge, learn to manage and take responsibility for his failures as well as his successes. Soon, Charlotte would have to rely upon her elder son as if he were Harry, her husband. Her concern was with his youth — so young — and the possible deleterious effect upon him of too-early imposed cares. Suddenly, she was being asked to let loose the man-child whom she had loved, did love — and see him go forth to battle in a world that she, herself, had barely come to terms with — and she was not ready.

Tomos had not moved from Catherine’s side. Passing Gemima’s chair to reach them Charlotte felt a restraining hand reach out to her. A look from Gemima sufficed. Charlotte paused, then nodded understanding to the old lady.

Whatever Charlotte intended to say to the pair was lost. What she did say was met by a beaming smile from Gemima.

‘Of course you did what I should have done for you. I’m sorry,’ Charlotte managed as she returned to her own place at the bottom of the table. ‘Guns, though, Catherine? I really do think you should put that weapon away now you’ve got your man!’

Tamar rose, moved swiftly to her side and flung himself at her in excited embrace, as an expression of his relief that the tension was broken. ‘Do you mean the Busbys — or Mr Brady?’ he asked.

‘Hah! Both!’ Gemima Capstock chortled which, for her anticipation earned her such serious-faced regard from Catherine as to make all but the ever-equable old lady wince. Even ebullient Tamar was speechless for a time thereafter.

2.

After Harry died Charlotte, who was naturally bereft at first, had gloomily played with the idea of selling up, of settling again somewhere on the coast; of returning to England, even,

where she might track down her mother's or father's relatives and perhaps find an anchorage there for her embattled soul. In those first days, she would look out of her kitchen window and stare blankly at the far-off hills to the east some fifteen miles distant across the uninhabited acres of pasture and wheat-lands, without any sense of empathy for what was now for her a cruel land. She would cease whatever she was doing, be still and cry seemingly endless tears because of her loneliness.

Alec Busby, who farmed the block adjoining Lower Meliot Farm, possessed of more sons than his acres were likely to support, saw his chance and proposed a sale contract which even Charlotte, willing enough to rid herself of the site of her tragedy and present misery, saw with regret was a proposal as bogus as it was insincere. Her blood rose. She sought the counsel of Jensen. He, however, being a man in the traditional sense, was unable to conceive of any woman successfully running a farm which was, to him, a man's role through and through. Much as he admired Charlotte as a woman, he experienced extreme difficulty in discussing farm routines, was embarrassed to talk with her about mating, lambing, marking, the number of teats to look for on a sow's belly; of animals on heat or when to cut a colt. Jensen finally buckled under the strain of it and unintentionally treated Charlotte rudely.

3.

Old Gemima Capstock was aglow with satisfaction. Charlotte managed to take in the news of Catherine's engagement and impending marriage to Hugh Brady selflessly and to be happy for the girl. But Catherine's departure from Lower Meliot Farm was not something Charlotte cared to dwell upon at first. Could she ... could she and Tomos really handle the running of the farm without the help and, she admitted, the guidance of the girl? Catherine was the spirit of Harry Coates as Charlotte would be the last to deny. For all she knew, Catherine still kept open a channel of approach to the man who told her when to arrange the cyclical activities that stock and land demanded of the husbandman. Catherine's touch, Charlotte felt sure, was either thus directed or the young woman was a natural farmer. Once she had at last admitted to herself that under Catherine's management, the work of the farm would proceed as if Harry himself were in charge, Charlotte relinquished further thoughts of involving herself in any aspect of it other than in marketing the farm's produce and the direction of its finances.

While Charlotte had grieved first for Sophie and then for her Harry, it had been Catherine, a grief-fuelled automaton herself, who had run the farm, who had tended the

animals, seen to the lambing, the marking, the shearing. It was Catherine who had repaired the fences, who had, with the help of the boys, cut, raked, turned, carted and stacked the hay. It was she who had organized the shearing, classed the wool, baled it and seen it shipped off to the agent.

When the Busby boys had first put themselves forward as sharecroppers, Charlotte, careless of all but the basic details of such an arrangement had dazedly agreed to allow her neighbour's sons continued access, unaware of Catherine's objections, so rarely did the girl speak at all to her.

It was really only after Catherine and Tomos had seen off the Busby boys that Charlotte understood how deeply the young woman resented the share-croppers being on the property.

Now, so soon after this new plateau of family interdependence had been established and through it, a first crop that had been planted which would be shortly ready for harvesting, the mainstay of the re-invented Coates family was about to become separated. Catherine, the inspiration of the movement, was about to withdraw into matrimony. Her natural reticence was no help and would not facilitate solutions in any way. Charlotte felt that any discussion of Catherine's future role in the operation of Lower Meliot Farm would be tantamount to an imposition upon the girl. It was this sentiment which forced Charlotte to remain silent on the matter.

Tomos, on the other hand, became brighter, more deeply interested in his role and more adamantly certain of himself. In short time, he had mastered the art of having his team plough a straight furrow, had learned the intricacies of the seeding machine and, despite his youthy, untried muscles, had overcome with logistics the business of transferring the contents of a one hundred and eighty pound sack of seed wheat from a wagon top into the seed box of the drill without tearing a ligament or fracturing any part of himself.

The single-horse mower, the hay rake; carting and stacking, alongside Catherine and — sometimes, when other commitments allowed, Tamar — came with ease to Tomos as task details accrued. Sheep-shearing, though, came less easily to him. With the hired men as instructors, Tomos learned the art in the course of Lower Meliot's first shearing, the number of sheep he sheared being added to his instructors' daily tally as payment for their advice to him.

In short time, Tomos became boundary rider, veterinarian and minor weather prophet. He was able to operate the elementary forge which Harry had set up in order to repair his

various machines and he was learning fast the science of animal behaviour — the difficult logic of the sheep singular and en-masse having provided him with some costly demonstrations of his earlier, inept attempts at crowd control. The willingness of sheep, under certain circumstances to stubbornly pursue to the death courses of action plainly inspired by stupidity quickly, graphically and dramatically educated their shepherd in the ways of these determined animals, while skinning the thus self-sacrificed beasts urged the exercise in Tomos the arts of analytical reflection ... and of flaying.

In all these pursuits, there was surfaced in the mind of the lad the image of an inspiring icon. This was not that of his much-admired dead father, nor was it recognizably a vision of his equally-loved mother ... but it was Catherine. For a fleeting glance of approbation, a tiny smile of approval, an agreeable nod of Catherine's head, Tomos would happily labour the day long. To have her look down upon him benignly from the pedestal on which in his mind she dwelt, was enough fuel to keep him fixed on any task until it was done.

Tomos made mistakes. He corrected them. He discussed farm matters endlessly, albeit one-sidedly, mostly, because Catherine never said much. Perhaps this was the reason for his success. He being an intelligent boy, he was always able, eventually, to arrive visibly unaided at the right way of doing something. Just now and then, a word, the lift of an eyebrow from her, his idol, or even a brief hand contact on his, was all that was needed to set him back on course.

Tomos didn't love Catherine. He adored and admired her, perhaps; although any suggestion that their connection was anything else not only shocked the innocent-seeming Tomos but also singularly enraged him — as Tamar discovered when, in reprisal for his brother's disclosures about his behaviour with Penny Busby, he sought to make something that wasn't out of the "Tomos and Catherine dimension", as he had called it.

Catherine's imminent marriage held no dire implications at all for Tomos. She would still be quite near, at Jensen's where the couple, once married, would set up house. He saw no reason to think that his mentor would not be available to him.

Tomos was overjoyed that Catherine had chosen Hugh Brady for her mate since he was a man Tomos much admired, a person with whom he empathized and who, in return, spoke to him man to man, not as something as yet embryonic.

CHAPTER Seventeen

The true sheep-farmer can be easily drafted out of a mob by observing in him any of the following practices such a one will indulge in, given a pen of sheep. If the pen is jam-packed full of woolly creatures, the sheepman outside will automatically lean over the rail and part the fleece of a number of animals thus obtaining in a trice information on the average quality of the wool, the condition of the pastures upon which the animals have fed in past months, whether or not they have been hand-fed and the approximate age of each individual. He processes this information while discussing quite un-related topics: cropping proposals for the coming year, the relative merits of a number of brand-name drenches, so and so's capacity for whisky or, if pressed, the state of the government. Given that the pen is less populated and that there is room within it for the farmer as well, he might take this opportunity to reinforce his learning and keep it up to date by straddling an animal, grasping it around the neck with one hand and with the other forcing open the assaultee's mouth to examine its teeth. Wool-quality inspections may follow, either from this position or, if the occasion warrants, the animal will be up-ended, with its rump to the ground while detailed auditing is carried out. Such things as belly and flank wool will be assessed, eye condition and hoof development. If the brute is a ram, of course it will be checked for entirety and absence of shearing-caused damage.

Sheepfarmer-isms had attracted me very early in my apprenticeship. By the age of seventeen, I knew all the actions and, aware that I needed to hone the attendant skills before I could ever hope to hold my own with the neighbours — an absolute imperative of the embryonic cocky, whatever his specialty — I missed no chance when alone or in the company of the less-critical to build on my store of sheepish expertise.

Crutching was in full swing. Compared with shearing, the process of de-dagging and removing the wool from those parts of the animal likely to attract and harbour blowflies proceeds with the speed of light. Pens-full of sheep come and go hardly before one has a chance to say "hello" to them. (Shepherding instincts arise early in the new farmer and are subdued thereafter only in the presence of non-farming relatives and/or city slickers). Towards the end of the run, it was time to bring in the rams for their short back and sides. Within the yard gateway and in the pens, great clashing of horns accompanies this exercise as the animals vie for precedence through races and doorways and smash into things and each other in the process. The pen was full; the crutcher working at full speed. Our

shearer-cum-crutcher was an obliging chap in most respects who would clear away his own daggy locks if needs be, even help fill his own catching pen occasionally, but he would never work a second beyond the award-stipulated, two-hour run between smoko or meal breaks. So this day, he sat on the board, back resting against the catching pen, enjoying his tea and cake mid-morning. Only two animals remained to be crutched. "Ah!" thought I, as the by-now imprinted urge to opportunistically check out the beasts took me pen-wards. The younger of the two animals happened to be one I had spared the emasculating knife in its childhood in order to examine the mystery surrounding "the ram" — a creature bred by others and bought in: never raised in the flock. The particular animal I was interested in as I entered that pen was a four-tooth young sheep of promising conformation which, last time I checked, wore the exact grade of coat I believed we wanted our other sheep to wear. I had been very pleased with him. Alas! his natural proclivity for ewe-chasing had been curbed so far: I was not prepared to cope with in-breeding, just yet. In the other corner, as it were, was old Bertie, the only ram in our flock personified by name. Bertie was so-called because of his likeness to his original breeder and vendor whose first name was Albert. Bertie wasn't senile by any means; but I had observed that his eyesight was a bit faulty. Thus, as I gave my young hopeful the full treatment, tipped up as he was on his rump, me bending over him the more microscopically to examine every corner of his fleece, the older sheep's dim view of me changed me into a fox or something. Head down, Bertie charged, delivering to me an almighty thump as head to head with his foe the old boy walloped into me.

"Brain's a bit shaken up," diagnosed the irritable doctor drawn away from his Saturday-night at the Club. "Take some aspirin and rest for a few days."

Lamentably, I believed him. I did as he prescribed — until Monday — when the crutchings needed to be baled up. Part of the woolpress fell on my head while I was doing that and for the next twelve months, my agony was exquisite, during which period various doctors offered various explanations for what seemed to me an intolerable and unnaturally aching head. Sexual repression-caused hypochondria, self-induced migraine, poor posture, simple malingering ... filled a list of medically-proposed analyses I hoped in later years their champions, in shame, might forget. Mother weighed in with a Wassermann test after recalling to mind the scriptural advice about the "sins of the father ... ye, even unto the third and fourth generations", and freely interpreting the matter of gender ... which raised some interesting speculations as to just what she had been up to and with whom

besides the "Waterman" — a Public Works Department inspector who had called from time to time at our Parkerville place. Syphilis is what she suspected was my plague.

I owe it, however indirectly, to Mother and an unknown doctor she consulted for troubles of her own, for returning me to a reasonable equilibrium. This medical mystery woman suggested that I have another series of x-rays which when taken, even to my unpracticed eye, revealed a healed split in my skull that nature had sewn up very handsomely. I felt better immediately!

* * * * *

‘He was putting Flash over the double gates at the two-hundred, Ma.’

‘Don’t you believe him, Ma. He always was a liar.’

‘I am not! Ask Penny Busby if you like, Ma. She saw him, same as me. Tomos ran Flash up to the gates then went back and put him over at the gallop!’

‘At the gallop!’ Tomos Coates sneered. ‘There you are, Ma. He’s lying. Whoever would take that gate, even at a gallop?’

‘You did! Penny clapped. I thought it looked great, too. But you know our Ma’s dead against it, aren’t you, Ma?’

‘Rotten little sod!’ complained Tomos, making to take an angry swipe at his younger brother. ‘What did you have to go and tell for, eh? So I’ll tell Ma about you and that Penny Busby in the oat crop, shall I?’

Tamar retreated into silence.

‘Come on, dear little Tam!’ Tomos sneered. ‘Ma, if only you knew what those two get up to you might think of using the Burdizzos on him for his own good!’

Charlotte was used to these spats between the brothers. They flared up from time to time but she placed no particular store by them. The childish arguments the boys engaged in, as she had long ago learned, seemed to be only a part of the maturation process. She would listen and, most times, say nothing. Sometimes, as now, she learned more in a few seconds than she may have become privy to in a month by any other means. Tomos was a mad keen horseman, she knew. She trusted Tomos, however, which action was really her only recourse. Had she worried about his riding, as she used to with Catherine when Harry was away, then her life would have been an utter misery.

But Tamar — and young Penny Busby? This was news. Catherine had lately included the girl among her passengers on the school run. Other than that, Charlotte had no idea as to

what Tomos was alluding to. She was tickled to think of Tomos contemplating her use of the castrating pliers on eleven year-old Tamar-the-last, however.

In the end, Tomos didn't tell his mother what he saw his younger brother doing with his little girl-friend in the oat paddock behind the stone barn because, at that moment, the arrival of Catherine and Mr Brady, the school-teacher, took precedence over his claim for his parent's attention.

A combination of Catherine's desperate willingness and Gemima Capstock's gentle but insistent manipulation of the affair had resulted in a love match between the young couple which, to Charlotte's mind, had wrought such a transformation in the once bereft-seeming girl as might have heartened the stone effigies of a museum-full of martyrs. Harry Coates, she thought, for all the world knew, may have risen from the dead to rejoice on catching sight of Catherine's reaction to the sound of Brady's voice, on her hearing his tread or on her first new sighting of the man. Catherine had released her years of stored accumulating love on this man, much as the sun of a new day might rise and flood the world with its warmth.

Catherine appeared to have come to the present at last, a later flowering than most. Another man was in her life, no match for the first; but contiguous with her earlier knowledge of the world. Hugh Brady was the one in whose company there seemed to be restored to her the continuity of her existence that with Harry's death had broken apart.

It was said of Hugh Brady that for his part he had found in Catherine a saviour of sorts who would protect him from long, lonesome evenings such as he saw filling the rest of his life, were he to spend his future in government-supplied quarters in the remote places with which the map of Western Australia was littered.

That Mr Brady was a good teacher there was no doubt. Among his pupils or between their rusticated parents he was generally loved, although some held reservations about his bachelor-hood. Being of the earth and focussed upon its reproductivity, a mature man who remained single beyond the naturally-occurring first flushy enthusiasms of interest in the female sex was an anomaly passing the comprehension of a farming community.

A deal of relief followed Mr Brady's and Catherine's announcement of their intentions to marry. Acceptance of Mr Brady became universal throughout the district and all the married couples expressed their pleasure, some even their excitement, at receiving their invitation to the wedding, which was set for the late winter.

Catherine and Hugh would make their first home together in the Jensen's workman's cottage — a two-roomed affair with a front and back verandah affording more space, it was thought, than any newly-married couple would need for a start. That Hugh Brady had quietly applied for a transfer in his job as soon as Catherine had accepted him was not a knowledge he had as yet imparted to his beloved intended. It had taken him only his first few days as the schoolmaster at Jensen's Crossing to appreciate that news of any sort travelled faster in a rural community than had the bubonic plague of old. His first lesson for himself had been reticence.

The little inter-denominational church at Jensen's Crossing was to be the marriage venue. The Reverend Joshua Samuels had promised to officiate. He was un-bothered by the minuscule nature of the church structure or the insignificance of its pulpit from which to preach his wedding message. "Christ", he often was heard to say, "came into the world as naked as the rest of us, in Himself becoming a temple no more adorned than we are. Bricks, mortar, wood and stones are joined together by man, not by God." The barren earth might have served the purpose of a church as well as could the shade of a tree, to Rosa's Josh.

Whole families turned up at Jensen's woolshed, straight after the shearing had been done and the wool bales had been loaded on the great, cumbersome wagon ready for its trip to the Sapphire Valley rail siding. There was a smell about the place, especially pungent under the influence of the warm late winter sunshine but who cared? What better place for a wedding reception? They were farmers, all saturated from their own births almost in the odours of dung, of birthings and fly-strike as well as the sweet breaths of ripening wheat and the first drops of rain on a thirsty earth.

Gavin Jensen couldn't see the sense in raking out the sheep droppings under the grating floors of the woolshed, but his Mavis said it would be a nice gesture, so that was that. " ... there he was, up to his armpits in shit," said Jensen's chronicler, "... and there was 'is old lady bringin' down a cuppa tea an' scones like it was a bloody picnic!" ran the report worth a shout in the pub later.

Charlotte and Sybil were attending to the shed decorations and arrived at Jensens' in the buggy " ... looking like a couple of twenty-eights up a gum tree. You could hardly see 'em for saplings and leaves!" squawked Chooky Hollis. They brought Gemima Capstock over on their second trip. Arthritis and all, she vowed to make herself useful and declared that she could hardly miss this fruition of her own handiwork, hip or no hip.

The boys had been at Jensen's all day. They had ridden over early in the morning and were said to be about somewhere, making themselves useful as promised. Mavis Jensen reported to Charlotte that she had seen Tomos around the stockyard helping with the bough shelter where the beer keg for the men would be set. Tamar was up at the house with the other children, she thought.

Clarke Jensen, the eldest of the three Jensen boys, at twenty-two finishing his engineering studies in the city, had come home to the farm for a year before deciding on what course his future would take. The Jensens owned several farms in other districts as well as the "home" property. Should he wish to have it, there was for Clarke the management and eventual ownership of "Trevorgus", a rich, bountiful and beautiful property to the south, which his father had offered him as a twenty-first birthday gift — though the young man had refused it at the time. Gavin Jensen had not repeated that unconditional offer, instead placing upon the lad's acceptance now a proviso. When Clarke had 'sorted himself out' the old man said 'and shown a willingness to settle down with a good woman' then "Trevorgus" would be his — a wedding present — '...if he wanted it, and as long as he didn't want to marry one of those Roman Catholics!'

Since it was common knowledge that Clarke Jensen, if he married a "satisfactory" girl, could become possessed of what many thought of as the most sort-after tract of farming land in the State, many a wife found herself importuned in various ways to recommend that young man to her daughter. Some mothers of eligible girls keenly and openly attempted to school their female children of marriageable age in the arts of seduction; but in general, mothers, as well as most of the girls, tended towards the gauche and obvious, fit perhaps to beguile and capture a farm-bound youth, but they were no match at all for a sharp lad schooled in the sophisticated ways of city life.

Today, with the wedding of his good friend Hugh Brady, Clarke Jensen as best man was spending the morning with the groom who was busy dressing in the meagre quarters attached to the little school on the crossroads.

'Just think, Hugh Brady! As from now you can go out with your lady friend with nothing in your pockets but a handkerchief and loose change,' Jensen was saying.

'What? Oh! I see. Yes. I wonder about you, Jenno. Tell me ... how did you pass your finals? On your own word, mind, you do seem to have spent an inordinate amount of time whoring, even making allowances for the baser clay from which farming stock is moulded.

I must hand it to you, though. You don't seem to have caught anything — or have you? Is it the pernicious pox, perhaps, that makes you so bloody randy? I wouldn't know, of course.'

'That is something I've been meaning to talk to you about, Mr Brady ... you have, haven't you?'

'If you mean what I think you mean ... mind your own business!'

Clarke Jensen laughed. 'You haven't, have you, Brady? Well! Who'd have thought it! You mean to say young Catherine has sat on it all this time ... and never shared ... ?'

Hugh Brady felt that this was not the time to discuss definitions of conquests or feelings or opinions on the matter of sexual relations. He knew himself to be, technically at least, a virgin and, apart from Catherine who would probably be too preoccupied with her own approach to that subject to notice or know of any deficiencies in him before he got a handle on the thing, the young man was certain no-one else was going to be able to point in scorn for certain at his inexperience.

'Shut up Jensen and take a look at this stud, will you?'

'Ah! Nervous, eh? Can't manage a simple collar stud, Sir? Rumour has it that a couple of your five and six standard kids could write a book on it already. What a pity you didn't ask them for a few pointers!'

'Give it a rest, will you ... and now I've dropped the bloody thing!'

'Sorry, mate. Here it is. Sorry. Here, I'll do that.'

Catherine, on the other hand, had been dressed for what seemed like hours. Lizzie Jensen, who was going to be one of the bridesmaids, had not even washed herself in readiness for her mid-afternoon role and already it was nearly two. The men would be here soon — and that meant Hugh Brady and his best man, Clarke Jensen. But Catherine didn't care. To her only Hugh and herself mattered. The others were welcome to tag along. As long as Josh was there to marry them, even Charlotte's presence or Rosa's or Gemima's was not so important to her. As long as she had her memories of Harry and she was able to bring him to life again in surrogate form, Catherine believed she could be happy again forever. It was to this life she looked forward. For the real Hugh Brady this waif-like young woman spared not a thought and Catherine being Catherine, this made her intended husband safer and more precious than had he existed eternally alone. Her children would be new personifications of the man she knew as her father, recreations of that ascribed

perfection which to her was all that mattered ... objects for her to love and to receive her devotion.

‘Here they come!’ Tamar Coates and Penny Busby shouted the news together to the wedding guests assembled.

Old Tony Martindale was ready. The tired old squeeze-box in his hands gave out the best notes of the Wedding March while the lesser ones fell aside barely noticed. There was a great, last minute shuffling of feet as the crowd rose to its feet. The little church seemed to rock on its timber stump foundations,

After receiving the couple, Reverend Joshua Samuels squeezed his way to the podium at the rear, beside the yellow bubble glass window, and the service commenced. On his right at the front were seated the bride’s people, while on his left, those who had chosen to be representatives of the groom barely stood out — none of Hugh Brady’s real family was present, the Bradys being for the most part Sydney-siders living some three thousand miles or so to the east.

‘... and so I pronounce you man and wife,’ concluded the Reverend Samuels.

In place of the usual though in this instance missing, barrelling organ sounds and joyous ringing of bells, three mighty cheers echoed against the corrugated iron roof of the church, wresting dominance over the sounds of assorted whoops, whistles and stamped feet. Dogs barked, tethered horses jibbed and laid back their ears, while a flock of sheep two hundred yards off one moment somnolently cud-chewing in the shade of the York gums panicked and fled in alarm to the far corner of Jensen’s house paddock.

Tony Martindale led off with a semblance again of the wedding march, leading bride and groom to their waiting “coach” — Charlotte Coates’s buggy — for the couple’s ceremonial leave-taking.

All knew that the trip about to be undertaken by the newly wedded pair would be simply a brisk trot up the hill to the farm-house, a circuit of the little orchard and the poultry shed and back again to the woolshed for the “reception”.

Mavis Jensen and her team of local farmers’ wives, on the grating floors of the woolshed holding-pens, had laid out tables laden with such food as only solid country folk might expect. On huge dishes lay huge quantities of the special delicacies fit to take a rural person’s heart away: chickens, a duck or two and in pride of place an enormous turkey, all

roasted to a golden brown. The meat carved and ready to be served. Beside it stood a china boat full of rich gravy, kept warm beside a charcoal brazier. Mounds of crisply-baked potatoes lay piled in casserole dishes, begging for mouths to consume them. Heirloom tureens full of green vegetables stood by. There were sauces and jellies of all sorts, and for those whose mental and gastronomic umbilicals remained as yet un-cut, quite inappropriately perhaps but none the less more than welcome to several of the wedding guests, a plateful to one side of stolid Yorkshire puddings.

Serving forks and tongs to hand, bare best china at the ready, the volunteer waitresses — mostly large ladies in long gowns rummaged from stored trunks — wearing wide brimmed straw hats, with their sweetest and best handkerchiefs pinned to their generally ample bosoms, stood by to receive the first onslaught of hungry guests — which followed after the chief bridesmaid and the best man on behalf of the bride and groom took first choice of the food.

The bridal table was laid out in the bay of the shed where the binder was usually kept. That machine the Jensens had now parked under a tree. The earthen floor of the bay had been strewn with hay, and fresh-cut eucalypt boughs were used to disguise the tool-house adjacent. The rough table from the shearers' quarters today wore a white damask cloth Mavis Jensen's mother, herself a new bride at the time, had brought out from "the mother country" years ago. It had lain worshipped and un-used ever since that day.

In addition to the cloth, a pair of silver-plated candlesticks from Mrs Harrison's collection of family relics had been rather self-consciously tendered on loan by that lady. She had been inspired, she said, by Mavis Jensen, to put these historical remnants to use in the hope, she said, of 'giving the damn things' some meaning to which she could relate. Mrs Harrison had tried to inculcate some cogency to these ornaments at home, at her own dinner table. Jim, her husband, on sight of them had laughed and told her he 'weren't no squire' and had said for her to 'get the bloody things back on the shelf where they belong.'

A pair of brocade covered padded chairs had been provided at the table for the guests of honour> There were others, too, for Charlotte, representing the bride's mother, for the best man and for the chief bridesmaid. The wedding guests arranged themselves about, wherever any object or protuberance afforded them comfort.

A quiet descended as the meal progressed. The scrape of cutlery on china, the clinking of glassware and the natural sounds of natural folk eating predominated. Occasionally, a raucous response to some undoubtedly lewd observation effected a following silence, when

forks, arrested in their travel were held in suspended motion, when looks were exchanged and smiles were captured in lacy cloths or napkins. But, but on the whole, even the children wasted no words while there was food still on their plates. There was something innate in their understanding of and respect for this basic necessity of life which stemmed, no doubt, from their community's reliance upon growth through feeding.

Jensen senior proposed the toast to the bride — and would have responded on her behalf except that his son Clarke was on his feet, speaking before his father could draw breath.

Catherine had always been a favourite of the elder Jensens. They spoke very warmly of her and for her. Mr and Mrs Jensen had been pleased to take over the responsibility of her wedding and to make it a happy and — they said — a memorable day. Just how memorable this August day was made eventually however, was not wholly scheduled.

The Reillys lived on the block next to Busby's. They were a family of thirteen which was an everlasting disappointment to Seamus, the rather indolent head of his tribe. Sheila and himself, as he was known to confess in his cups, “ ... shagged themselves silly trying for a twelfth” child which would have made the family fourteen. But it was not to be. “ ... the canny little beggar just wouldn't come, so there it was.” They were “... thirteen and thirteen they would remain with the devil doin' his worst without success, that is.”

Bugsy Reilly was in the same class at school as Penny Busby and Tamar Coates. Bugsy was the eleventh of his line — the last dynastic representative of his clan to attend the “Jensen's Corner Academy”. Just one Reilly remained in this centre of primary education — Seamus Junior, or Bugsy, as he was better known and known willingly, because who would really want to be called “Seamus”? Not so generally well known nor understood was how and why this particular sprig from the Hibernian tree Reilly was so nick-named. And no-one had ever thought to ask.

While Tamar Coates and Penny Busby seemed to be inseparables, less obvious were the liaisons between Bugsy and Tamar. The two boys were in fact great mates.

As things transpired, it was Tamar who reported to Bugsy on the manger-like setting for the bridal-party's reception lunch. Together, the boys had inspected the machinery bay, had seen the way it was decorated, with fresh straw on the floor and the gum-leaves. Bugsy was impressed, as was Tamar. Young Reilly said how much it reminded him of the nativity scenes illustrated in ‘them books’ Mr Brady had shown his classes at the little school last Christmas.

‘Say! She ain't up the duff, is she, Tam?’ Bugsy had asked wonderingly.

‘What do you mean? Who?’

‘Your Catherine, a’ course.’

‘Don’t think so, Bugs.’

‘Just thought she might be due, what with all the straw an’ stuff. Hey! Look at them candles!’ Buggsy Reilly had caught sight of Mrs Harrison’s silver candle-sticks. ‘Ain’t they beautiful!’

‘You reckon?’

‘Nar ... not really. Who uses candles now? We’ve got kerosene lamps.’

‘So have we,’ Tamar supplied, not to be out-done. ‘Come on, Bugs/ Let’s go!’

Tamar had heard the buzz of excitement emanating from the crowd of people keenly awaiting the return arrival of the bride and groom from yet another turn in the “coach” — they, of course this time being expected to be changed from their finery into more sober raiment prior to travelling.

The two boys raced off to towards the bough shelter where the beer was being served, the better to be informed as to the progress of the celebrations.

The late lunch was over. The serving ladies had metamorphosed into a line of kitchen skivvies and were washing up the dishes and stacking them in ownership piles. The men were back at the beer keg, young men had paired off with young women in various corners of the shed or around the stockyards, while unattached young males joined groups and loudly showed themselves off. Young children whined at their mothers’ skirts or played games in the dust and were being growled at. Older youngsters made groups and exchanged secretive whispers. Yet more, boys mostly, stood around, watched listening and learning from their adult role models.

There was in this cameo, a reflection of hiatus while the guests, during this final intermission, waited for the conclusion of the wedding ceremony — the sending-off of the newly-wedded pair. One or two lads went about investigative work, alone, pursuing their own thoughts while they entertained more intense fantasies than ever friend or companion could hope to understand.

Of the latter group, Buggsy Reilly was at this moment probably the foremost. Fascinated by the train of thought begun earlier on first sight of the “manger” as he thought of it, he was back in the machinery bay recreating the birth of Christ in colours more lurid than any he had previously imagined. There was the crib and yonder the ass. Joseph was

peering into the cradle while Mary in her bluest of blue veils looked on adoringly. There were windows and at the windows happy faces watching the three kings enter carrying their gifts. A halo there should have been — a halo around the head of the infant Jesus but Buggsy couldn't see one. There wasn't much light. Perhaps if he lit the two golden candles in the golden candlesticks he had brought as offerings himself ...

'Fire! Fire!'

It was Buggsy Reilly's voice, Tamar knew. It was Buggsy who was creating that hullabaloo.

Suddenly, there were people running in all directions. The Jensens were particularly agitated. Lizzie, in her bridesmaid's dress flew past carrying a tin of water in one hand while she desperately clutched at her head-dress with the other, trying to keep it in place.

Clarke Jensen was in the thick of it, beating at the flames with a sack. Mavis was standing back, holding a remnant of heirloom tablecloth and laughing hysterically.

No great harm was done. Buggsy Reilly was thrashed publicly by his drunken father for playing with fire — again. Mrs Jensen, once calmed, wasn't really upset at the loss of her tablecloth, and Mr Harrison was able to say 'There, I told you those bloody things don't have no place here, Missus' as he handed back to his wife the now rather blackened silver candlesticks her grandfather had been so proud of.

The departure of the newly-weds was anti-climatic after that. Tony Martindale tried a few bars of "Will ye no come back again?" as a buggy driven by a rather red-faced Clarke Jensen and bearing the newly-dedicated pair set off for Northam and the railway, but his chords fell on deaf ears. A final cheer was raised. Good wishes were said. One by one, in families, the wedding guests set off for distant homes.

Then, just the clip-clop of the horses' hooves and the jangle of their harness permeated the stillness of evening as darkness fell and mantled the scene in the quiet chill of an early Spring night.

Charlotte had watched Catherine and Hugh Brady launch themselves into their new lives together with some strange sense of foreboding. For a reason she would have been at a loss to explain there had surfaced in her consciousness a sudden vision of her meeting with Harry, that day years ago in Northam, where she, Charlotte Sommers, in company with

Aunty Gem had gone in search of her missing father, William. Catherine was seven years old then, precocious but lovable, uncomplicated, totally sure of herself, as devoted to Harry as he was to her. Yet Harry had never avowed to anyone that Catherine really was his child. Oh! Harry had loved the scamp. That was never in question. And since this was so, there never arose a doubt in Charlotte's mind that indeed the child was his. Charlotte had accepted Catherine as being part of her bargain when she succeeded Margaret Fox — and with this settlement she had always been satisfied.

After Harry's death — and a long time after, that was — it had struck Charlotte that it was a strange thing that Harry had made no provision for Catherine's future. Not that Catherine had need to worry on that score. It was Charlotte's understanding of the girl's position that her presence on Lower Meliot Farm was as legitimate and should be as lasting as her own. Still, Charlotte did wonder about this situation, occasionally.

Why the matter of the girl's origins should surface at this time when Catherine was at last breaking out into a new world caused Charlotte to smile quietly to herself. Was it Harry — still? Of course it was — and always would be, she thought. Then she became pensive. She had Tomos and Sybil and Tamar. She should be thankful for that, and she had many happy memories besides.

Sybil. It was Sybil climbing up into the buggy ready for the run home down the track through the York-gun stand who broke into Charlotte's reverie.

'Tomos is riding home — left fifteen minutes ago — and we can pick up Tam as we pass the house. He was going up to say goodbye to Buggsy and Penny. Mrs Jensen has invited Aunty Gem to stay over so she's coming home tomorrow.'

Charlotte turned her gaze upon her beautiful daughter in silence, smiled again, nodded, waved a hand directed to no-one in particular towards the woolshed and, after an appraising glance at the western horizon, set the buggy in motion with a business-like flick of the reins, Tamar's pony loosely tied to the back of the buggy following.

'We should just make home before dark, my girl — if Tam can tear himself away from his lady-love.'

'Mum! You know about those two! Mum, why haven't you done something!? It's so embarrassing being up-staged by my eleven year-old brother. The brat ought to be ...'

'No! Not the Burdizzos!' Charlotte feigned shock.

'Really, Mum. Don't be vulgar!'

‘Joking, sweetheart,’ Charlotte assured Sybil, delightedly amused, as the buggy drew abreast of the Jensen’s house gate. ‘At Tamar’s age, your mother was in love, too — hopelessly, she thought — and that was awful. I couldn’t wish a similar experience on anyone ... not that simply wishing will save any one from “the pangs of unrequited love”’.

‘All right,’ Sybil despaired, conceding a temporary defeat. ‘He’d better watch out, though, is all I have to say on the matter,’ she hissed as the brother whose behaviour had been under discussion slipped onto the seat beside her.

‘Give us a bit of your rug, Syb?’ Tamar asked tiredly.

Charlotte smiled as out of the corner of her eye she watched her Sybil draw her brother closer to her and wrap an end of her travelling rug about his knees.

Mavis Jensen waved until the Coates family was out of sight in the fading light, drawing her shawl about her. Happy, contented, she turned at last to her own affairs with an expression of utter satisfaction. So, another day had passed.

CHAPTER Eighteen

Cash was a commodity snatched from the yearly budget in morsels even wallet moths despised. Recreational trips away from the farm were governed by the vehicle's petrol tank capacity: farm supplies of fuel were available on account whereas purchases from foreign bowlers had to be paid for on the spot. Many times my successful return home had been made possible by a blind faith in the inaccuracy of the vehicle's fuel gauge. Penny-pinching began in earnest and still I rue the day when I reached Perth — with Mother of course — and delivered her to Daphne. Surreptitiously planning a night out in the city and thinking I was unobserved, I checked my wallet for the five-pound note I had hoarded and secreted there. But I stowed the precious fiver away again only to find, as I resumed my seat, a pair of deeply hurt reproachful eyes staring at me above positively slavering lips. It was Mother doing her doleful resignation act no more convincingly than ever before but still as ever successfully. My five-pound note became a new dress for Mother just as soon as a bus could deliver her to a shop.

Yearly, one bank manager after another failed to see any merit in paying me a cash wage, even though what I included in the proposed budget for myself was never more than half the prevailing basic allowance. My only chance, thereafter, was to retain some of the harvest each year and dispose of it quietly after the final accounting had taken place. I tried attack and found a whopping, erroneous entry in our favour in the Bank's accounts which allowed us some respite; but I was never forgiven for it.

Father's understanding of the financial system was founded on a belief in the future that was at times astounding. Spend now, pay later — and if later there proved to be nothing to cover the outlay, spend some more and thus reduce the single creditor's percentage of you. Had he operated in the nineteen eighties, I now realize, he would have owed millions, not paltry hundreds or thousands — and would have been counted a successful man. In the more conservative 'fifties, he needed to be less enthusiastic about his gold reserves. Others saw him as simply eccentric then; whereas in later years, under the influential enlightenment of certain brash but revered business schools, we now tend to say that eccentricity cannot exist among consumers of credit until she or he is actually proven bankrupt.

So between the Bank's requirement of its yearly dues and Father's determination to make it as difficult as possible for that institution to obtain annual satisfaction in respect of his

account, I could only survive by subterfuge. Fiscally, these were very and constantly challenging times!

* * * * *

As one year followed another, Hugh Brady's level-headed-ness was placed under increasing strain. The Education Department continued to ignore his requests for transfer. He lost some of the enthusiasm he had felt on his first appointment as he began to see his school — and himself — in a truer perspective. He contemplated resignation, but the void of the unknown frightened him, made him withdraw his ready pen from the fateful paper and endure another year as head — and only — master at Jensen's Crossing where, among the variable student children of the district he might sit, in contemplative moments, marvelling yet again at Shakespeare's perspicacity, doing a Hamlet of himself and wondering what form his metaphorical poison might take.

Catherine still loved her Hugh dearly, as she always would. Increasingly, however, she spent her days at Lower Meliot Farm, where a part of her, Hugh realized, would ever remain, unless ... but Hugh could never finish this speculation. There seemed to be no reasonable or foreseeable end to it. Lower Meliot Farm was where Catherine's memories were centred and he was well aware that in her arms he lay as a ghost.

The eerie-ness of Catherine's obsessive retention of Harry troubled Hugh, once he knew of it. How he came to know of it horrified him initially. It made him feel almost incestuous. On that first occasion he had leapt out of bed blindly, repelled, revolted. Was the woman he had married sane? Had he saddled himself with some contemptible succuba who would drag him down, end his career and chain him to anonymity for the rest of his life?

For weeks, Hugh Brady posited scenarios for himself of increasing gloom and hopelessness without uttering one word of his fears to Catherine. Only when he broke down and wept one summery evening when, their meal finished he saw her settle in a chair on the verandah of their cottage — from which there was a considerable view both of Jensen's pasture and, away in the distance, a glimmer of light from the homestead where her heart resided — could he restrain his misery any longer.

At the sound of his sighing, Catherine looked around. Startled, she saw the pathos in him. She rose and came close. She drew him to her. She had never learned to be warm. Close contact with another had not been part of her up-bringing. To embrace discomforted her. Only with Hugh had she begun to learn about the emotions that fly between men and women. Still, she was mostly that independent entity she had always been whenever Harry

was out of her sight. What she had felt about Harry she had never studied, never expressed. It was an instinctive thing that had resulted in her being protected, made safe. Now, with her arousal to sensual love there was confusion and conflict in her reaction to this new set of feelings and responses. The very violence of her unleashed passion frightened her. Automatically, as she had done ever since she could remember when encountering stress, she would call for her shield and her defence — Harry. At the height of her ecstasy it was Harry's name that was on her lips.

'Can't you understand, Hugh? It's you I love that way — and I always will. But I can't promise never to say — well — what I do say. It just comes out. But I do love you the most, now, Hugh! Of course I do.'

Little by little, Hugh Brady, not unaware of the irony of it, came to terms with his wife's strange behaviour, indeed came at last to regard the strength of her entreaties to Harry as a measure of his worth as a lover. And, at last, such was their accord that the germ of their first child began to grow.

However much Charlotte enjoyed hearing Catherine's news, its consequences for herself and the welfare of the farm — and thus the preservation of her own family — surfaced almost immediately. She felt that she must make the effort now to secure her own future, to look to the management of her business which had grown into something of considerable importance to her, especially since Tomos had taken over its operation.

Charlotte's greatest survival difficulty over the years had to do with money management. Reuben Zanger had been her agent for some time, negotiating for her the sale of her grain and wool — always at a fair price, all expenses scrupulously disclosed and itemised — on occasions advancing cash and extending credit to Charlotte according to seasonal demands. Of perhaps more value than anything else, Zanger had offered her advice and guidance in all financial matters. Now, with the likely withdrawal of Catherine from her interest in Lower Meliot Farm, there seemed to Charlotte a possibility that the property Harry had entrusted her with might become vulnerable if left to her sole management. She needed help, she thought. Zanger seemed to her to be an obvious source.

Reuben Zanger bore the stigma of his ancestry with tired resignation. He was forty-five, tall, lanky, loosely put together, sallow of face, black-bearded with a full head of curly dark hair yet. He was a man of mystery to many, his independent ways not understood. Begrudgingly approached at the conclusion of the harvest or when there were sheep-skins

to be sold or sometimes items of fodder or stock remedies to be bought or bargained for, Reuben was otherwise outwardly ignored in such a way as only the odd-man-out in a country town can know.

Zanger lived in a house set apart from the others of the township. He lived there behind a hedge of tecomaria which on some Sunday afternoons he attended to with his trimming shears. There he lived with his housekeeper, so they said, and his two children, Zeta and Joel, with a cat — black, of course — a tired old black labrador dog and six black pullets.

Some of the lads who had bravely peered over the Zangers' back fence said there was a canary as well — they had heard it singing, though Joey Bartlett said it was a budgerigar and that it was only old Zanger whistling to it.

When Reuben Zanger was seen coming from Lower Meliot Farm, riding his mangy roan cart horse and wearing his black hat, black suit and black boots there was food enough for gossip.

When Charlotte Coates was seen coming away from Zanger's premises in town only a week later and it not being harvest time by a month or two, only one conclusion seemed possible, unthinkable as this might be.

When the Zangers — Reuben, Zeta and Joel — were seen driving out to Lower Meliot Farm barely a weekend later, only one conclusion was possible — and the contemplation of that surely made the blood run cold.

It was Jensen who first learned of it — or guessed the truth of the matter. Joel Zanger was to be put to farming. The lad at thirteen was a year older than young Tamar Coates but thought to be companionable. For a consideration to be paid to Charlotte Coates, the boy was to spend a year on the farm, learning and being taught what he could absorb by she whom Zanger Senior took to be the most likely fount of knowledge in terms of agricultural survival reliably known to him in the district.

Thus it came about that Charlotte Coates's visit to the agent was explained and how he, the German Jew, came in turn to ride out to "poor old Harry Coates's farm". Matters were settled quickly. Zanger would take over the management of Charlotte's finances, would advise her of future market conditions as seen by the trade and continue to market the farm's output. In return, Charlotte would take in Zanger's son Joel, encouraging the lad to learn all he could about farming — for an initial period of a year. Whatever labour input to the farm the boy gave would be rewarded in any way Charlotte saw fit. Since Joel Zanger was a personable lad, much admired and a friend of Tamar's, the arrangement, thought

Charlotte, was not a too onerous price to pay for the security of knowing Zanger senior was on her side. Joel would attend Mt Brady's school, alongside Tamar.

As so often happens, there was in this decision of Charlotte's something as fateful as was foretold when the young Harry Coates years before in Cornwall, proudly at his father's side, was first signed on at the Wheal Daisy. Fate, the prevaricator, would in the form of Joel Zanger maintain an innocent face for several years before revealing itself.

He who gained the soonest from Charlotte's arrangement with Reuben Zanger was Tamar. Still a child, his life's enjoyment on the farm prior to the advent within his orbit of the agent's son had been one largely dependent upon the scope of his imagination — apart from his few famous episodes which he co-acted with the girl Penny from next door. With the appearance of Joel Zanger, Tamar's world now enlarged immensely.

Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn may well have borne jealousy grudgingly as the Red Fang — consisting of fence posts lashed together on a float of empty four gallon paraffin tins put out from the shores of Queeriarup — an occasional, nearby salt-lake — with its complement of swaggering sword-in-teeth pirates two, bound for the Spanish Main. Yo-ho! The wind blew high! Spirits, too, were careless. Strings of black treasure ships abounded — with red wattles, mean eyes and belligerent attitudes — as cross as any black swan with five newly hatched cygnets in tow. To the oars, men, before the infidels escape!

The crew lift their packing-case slats and paddle furiously — further and further from the shore. A sudden wind rises! Before the doughty corsair captain realises it, the ship is aground on the opposite bank. The wind intensifies! Night begins to fall.

Glumly, Tamar and Joel begin the long, two-mile trudge home — around the lake and across the fields.

While Tamar managed to look suitably chastened by his sister's tirade, Joel Zanger, cat-like, couldn't help looking as though he had managed to open the cage and pleasantly dine on the unfortunate bird his actions had exposed. He felt as though he was beginning to become part of the family — with Sybil, at least.

Tomos, however, was too enraptured of his position on the farm, too immersed in the affairs of the agriculturist to do more than look down from the heights of his importance, briefly nod in acknowledgment of Joel Zanger's presence, before directing his very serious-young mind again to the innumerable tasks there were for him to perform .

Charlotte very soon was no less warm to Joel Zanger than was her habit with Tamar. The boys might be twins, to her and as twins are close, so Tamar and Joel became as more and more shared adventures welded their mutual friendship.

By the end of the winter, the two boys were inseparable, mates. Where Charlotte looked on at the pair amusedly, Reuben Zanger regarded this development with satisfaction as on Sundays, as it so required, he trimmed his tecomaria hedge and hummed gently to himself.

Zeta Zanger became lonesome, without her brother. Reuben traded for a puppy which he gave to his pining daughter, telling her to be patient as he kissed her on the forehead and patted her hair.

CHAPTER Nineteen

1917

1.

Bodies lay everywhere over much of Europe. These were dead bodies, sometimes whole, sometimes in pieces. These were strange times. It seemed that hate was all but victorious. A world away, strangers were killing strangers for no discernible reason that Australians who had been able to free themselves from the bonds of a bogus Motherland could see; but the romance of war and the opportunity to travel to foreign lands was an excitement for many not to be missed — and an easy incitement to youth, which the devils of conflict unconscionably fed.

Tamar Coates joined up in 1917, and after a short period of basic training he was shipped off to Melbourne aboard His Majesty's Australian Troopship Shropshire, as his first letter home from camp discloses:

Broadmeadows

Victoria

Oct 16th, 1917

Dear Mum

Just a line or two to let you know that we all arrived in Melbourne safely after having a very good trip over. We arrived in Port Melbourne last night at 6 o'clock by the Troopship H.M.A.T. Shropshire. I wasn't sick once coming over although Arthur was for a couple of days. When we arrived we were brought straight up to Broadmeadows and we will be here for a couple of days yet before we sail for England. We are going in another Transport then. We got a good reception when we arrived in this Camp especially with the other Westralians who are over here for training. There were 400 Westralians come over and we don't like this Camp much. I think the best address would be "On Active Service" or "Abroad". We will be going on leave today to have a fly around Melbourne. We never had a smoke even coming over. There wasn't even a bit of tobacco on the boat but we made up for it when we got back on land. Tell Tomos the boat we came over had bonzer boilers on her and engines, she also had a 4' gun too. Tell Penny I will write to her soon.

Well Mum this is all the news I can think of for the time

I remain

Your loving Tam

The excitement that had greeted this first letter of Tamar's subsided into a silence except for the sound of Penny Busby's voice as she read aloud. Charlotte had been unable to bring herself to open any of the mail that day. Her beloved baby had gone to war, gone to "hit the Hun where it hurts", as the recruitment posters had it; to "take a smack at Fritz" whomsoever he or it might be. It had been all a mistake. Tomos had been able to resist the appeals of the war-mongering Prime Minister to voters when in December 1915 he had canvassed support for a "Yes" vote in respect of conscription. That man's infamous letter to the Nation whereby thousands of men had signed up for the army and were subsequently consigned to their maiming or death still rang in the ears of the enthusiastic innocents. Even in 1917, the youngsters still heard only the bugle echoing in the promised "Temple of the Immortals" and not the screams of those who perished on its steps lacking the blood or limbs to reach that auditorium. Joel Zanger was able to lay low on Lower Meliot Farm. His father and young sister in the town were not so fortunate; but endured the scorn they were daily subjected to with a stoic dignity, and understanding.

Looking out over the peaceful fields of Lower Meliot Farm, Charlotte wondered, tried hard to imagine an invader blundering across the Eighty acres, watering his horde of horses in the house dam, threatening to rape and pillage and murder — as the posters would have it — and all of these marauders were Germans. Reuben Zanger was a German — a Jew, as well, but still a German. Where, wondered Charlotte, would she find a more gentle man than Reuben?

'Penny!' exclaimed Charlotte, clasping the girl to her on rising from her seat at the head of the kitchen table. 'We all miss him, sweetheart,' the older woman said.

'Sorry, Mrs Coates. He's your son. Of course you miss him more than ...', Penny sobbed on Charlotte's shoulder, unable to restrain the flood of tears from bursting out.

'Don't worry, dear. He'll be back soon — and safe ... And as for missing him ... well, it's what we women do best, I suspect.' Charlotte offered, a little pensively.

Tomos rose abruptly from the table where the remnants of afternoon tea lay like the discards of a local skirmish, leaving the kitchen without a word. He was fighting a war himself, the battle within over the question of his own enlistment. How long he could resist the influences trying to overwhelm him was his nightmare quandary. White feathers in the mail, snide remarks of the shop-keepers in the town, the examples of friends and acquaintances sending home their comments from the "front" — or their pitiful effects and

remembrances. And now Tamar, heading for the greatest holocaust the world had known, and treating this as an adventure! Couldn't his young brother, couldn't anyone — including that evil gnome of a Prime Minister — see this war for what it was or that the whole idea of this conflict was archaic, that its objectives had no relevance in this new world? Could no-one see that this patronage of the common man was a farce, that in the world all men were of the common weal; that the possession of money and influence hence power, did not make a man apart? The war in Europe was the cancer grown out of greed for commercial domination. The war was nothing more than this — to young Tomos Coates and to many others. Had Tomos lived in a larger community, he would have been sure to find the company of many people possessed of a turn of mind akin to his own. In a small rural community of which Lower Meliot Farm was its centre for him he was an iconoclast misunderstood at best and publicly reviled by some.

Joel Zanger, the son of Charlotte's farm agent, had returned to Lower Meliot on hearing that Tamar had "gone to war". Manpower was short and likely to become more so. With the anticipated enlistment of Tomos — which, it was presumed, soon would occur, given the public pressure to "join up" that was being applied to all young men — Joel stood ready to take his place. He now also rose from the table, bid Penny 'Good afternoon, Miss Busby', bestowed an apologetic-seeming smile upon Charlotte's presently preoccupied face and followed Tomos.

Charlotte could not help noticing the sneering glance with which Penny had responded to Zanger's adieu. 'Joel was born in Perth, Penny. That makes him an Australian — just as is Tamar — and you. Be kind to him Penny, please,' was her entreaty.

'He's a German!' avowed the girl, full of what she had been told was patriotic fervour.

'Nonsense, Penny! Tamar and Joel are great friends — just as you are with Tamar.' Charlotte smiled. It amused her that the son of her innocuous farm agent should have become more or less overnight not only suddenly black, pointy-eared, tailed and cloven-hoofed but a representative of human baby-eaters as well as being vampire-fanged and vile-smelling.

'I know!' Penny cried, 'I know they are each other's best friend ... but ... I love him. I love Tamar, Mrs Coates!', her voice rising.

Since the two women were at opposite sides of the table at this point, Charlotte was afforded a view of the girl she might otherwise have been denied. Such depth of feeling between her son and this child of her neighbour had never before been realized. This was

more than just a simple, friendly relationship between young people of more or less the same age. What Charlotte saw in the girl's face was love in its deepest despair and anxiety, the love of the separated, the thus bereft, the unguided, the desperate, the almost deranged.

'Penny!' Charlotte spoke sharply; but with the best intentions. The girl needed help to cope with her loss, Charlotte knew. She knew it with an intuition whose mysteries imbue those accustomed to live outside themselves and understand others.

Penny had risen, but now collapsed back onto a chair and sat sobbing, her chin dropped on her chest, her hands folded away on her lap as though abandoned. For long minutes she would not be comforted, no matter the efforts of Charlotte to bring the girl back to the present. It was more to shock Penny into returning to some version of practical communication as much as to elicit confirmation of her suspicions, suspicions which had grown over several weeks and not entirely from this day's episode. 'Penny, are you pregnant?' Charlotte asked.

Penny managed a teary nod.

'Tamar?'

Again, a blubbery nod of affirmation.

There was now a new reason for Charlotte to seat herself beside her son's lover, as a mother to draw her to her bosom this time and to comfort her — as the age-old confederation in misery of sweetheart and mother formed again to endorse a facet of effect rarely noted in any official histories of war.

Kevin Grace and "Blocker" Jones were ambling towards the wicket, ready to open the innings for the Boogardie Bashers team. George Ahern and Tomos Coates would take the ball for the Grasshoppers. Umpires were on the field, Jensen Senior with fob-watch in hand, conferring with Ted Grimble. The Hoppers were a man short. That would be Syd Hockley, the Baptist minister, whose horse and trap could already be seen scooting along ahead of a dust stream out past the mid-off boundary. Syd was the Hoppers' wicket-keeper — when the Church and church duties released him for it, every second Sunday. Alternate Sundays, Syd took the service at Condy's Rocks, so the Hoppers then had to field a substitute. Today, however, spirits were high among the Hoppers — they'd beaten the Bashers four times out of seven over the last three seasons, so the odds were in their favour.

Blocker Jones would receive the first ball today and it would be bowled by the Hoppers fast right arm-er, Kevin "Gracie" Grace. Blocker was already wearing a limp from a quick

one last Sunday from “Demon” Harris of the Condy’s mob. Pads were for townies. Besides, as Blocker was famous for saying at least once a match: ‘Yer’d get no help from a heap of pads if yer stuck yer head into the path of a .303 bullet in the trenches, yer baby!’

It wasn’t Gracie who struck Blocker the first rap on the shins today; it was Gresley Jones who slipped a well-disguised quick’un around Blocker’s bat. Gresley’s next ball did the same, skidded around Blocker’s bat but this time caught him fair on the knee-cap.

As the bull of a man was falling to the ground, his face contorted by the pain, he did manage a shortened version this time of his famous response to previous injury — his own, or any other batsman unfortunate enough to have a tune played on his shin bones: ‘Shit! A fuckin’ .303 bullet in the neck couldn’t hurt that much!’

Certain lady members sitting on the pavilion verandah reddened, huffed and ceremoniously left the ground.

‘Old chooks a’ gone to pluck their own white tail feathers and send ‘em or have ‘em sent to any young bloke in the district they think’d be better off standin’ crutch-deep in the mud and blood and bones a’ France, tryin’ to shoot bloody Germans for King George, I s’pose,’ Crossthwaite the grocer was over-heard to opine as he stared at the retreating figures out of his one remaining eye, the one he didn’t leave with the Boers in South Africa.

‘Yair, yer right there, Crossie. Funny things, them white feavvers. Some young blokes when they gets ‘em go as silly as chooks an’ rush off to henlist as if they really was bloody chooks. Other fellas — like Tommo Coates, fer hinstance — must collect ‘em — white feavvers, I mean — an’ use ‘em to stuff pillas an’ that.’

‘Piss off, Porkie — and leave Tommo out of it. Young Tam, his brother, is over there, doin’ his bit. Leave it.’

‘Didn’t rush, didn’t Tam. Then maybe Tommo pushed him into it.’

‘Did a runner, like as not, after the state ‘e left a certain young lady in, so I hear.’

‘Blocker’s comin’ off. You’re in. Fred.’

There is intermission on the players end of the verandah while the phenomenon of Blocker Jones actually being assisted from the field is enacted.

‘Maudie and the kids better act scarce, tonight,’ someone among the observers chortled. Like once-ruffled birds, the conversationalists soon settled as Fred Whittle, on reaching the crease, took strike then whacked the first ball he got back to the bowler.

‘Was it him? Or was it Tommo? Or maybe neither. Them Busbys are pretty wild ... ‘

‘Who said anything about the Busby girl?’

'Who else could Fred have been talking about?'

'Could have been that Sybil. Now there's a ... '

'Hey! Just what are you inferring, Gates?'

'Settle down, you two. Clarke! Gatesy.!'

'I was just talking ... that's all.'

'Leave it to the men, next time, you silly little bastard.'

'Oi! Fred's gone. Fancy him! How many balls? You'd better go on next, Clarke. A hundred should do yer, this time, mate!'

'OK'

'Does that Jensen fancy Sybil Coates, do you think?'

'Could be, I s'pose. She must be about the only tart in the district who ain't fluttered her eyelashes at 'im.'

2.

Tamar Coates

51st battalion

Australian Imperial Forces Abroad

Dear Mum

Just a line to let you know we arrived safely in Plymouth, England on Xmas Day after being eight weeks on the water. Two days before we got to England I got the flaming mumps and of course I am now in an Isolation Hospital at Plymouth, it is called the Hyde Park Section, 4th Southern General Hospital at Plymouth. I am all right now the swelling has gone down. I suppose we will be here a fortnight yet. Well, Mum, the English nurses we have here are great women especially the two night nurses. We saw the Old Year out and the New Year in last night and had a good time in the ward. I suppose you had the same old time down at the Cricket Club. I was just thinking that last year I was down at Perth seeing the old Year out. I am a few miles away from there now. We took 28 days to come from Melbourne to the Panama Canal which is a wonderful bit of work. We then went to Trinidad and were there a week before we left for England. It was very hot there. We were let off at Trinidad one night and were given a great reception by the people there. I have written to Tomos and Sybil since I came here. I suppose I will get some letters from home when I get out of here. There was a little snow falling this morning. I suppose you all

still play tennis. It was a change to get into a nice clean bed after the dirty old boat. Well Mum this is all the news I can think of for the time so I will now close.

I remain

Your loving Tam

(P.S. Always put “Australian Imperial Forces Abroad” and not just “A.I.F.” as we are not liable to get them.)

‘What are you thinking, Tomos?’ Charlotte asked, looking across the table at her eldest son as she finished reading the letter.

‘Didn’t Dad leave from Plymouth to come to Australia? Isn’t it like the return of the prodigal, a bit?’

‘I suppose so, love. I suppose it is ... But as far as I recall that story, I wonder: the prodigal son didn’t have the mumps, did he?’ Charlotte responded with laboured flippancy. A mother had to have recourse to some other emotion than that which loaded her days with anxiety for the welfare of her brood. Levity, she found, was a useful antidote for use against ‘the miseries’.

‘Hey. Mum: do you remember that joke about Tamar, Penny Busby and the Burdizzos? Looks as though the pliers won’t be needed any more — not if Tam really has got the mumps. There’ll be no stopping him ... ‘

Charlotte smiled, her inner thoughts holding her in thrall for a moment. ‘There’s something you’d better know, Tomos, lest you say the wrong thing to the wrong person.’

‘Oh? ... Just a minute, Mum. Skipper’s barking. Must be someone coming. I’d better see who it is.’

‘Perhaps it is too early, after all,’ Charlotte murmured to herself, her eyes fixed on the distant view through the kitchen screen door, a view through which the tall figure of her dark-haired son was striding, towards the house-yard gate.

Charlotte rose; sighed. It was time to prepare the morning tea. Already she could hear the old lady stirring in the inner bedroom. Gemima would soon be appearing in the kitchen, ready for her ritual first-of-the-day cup of tea. This morning, the “Venerable Capstock”, as Tomos sometimes referred to his beloved, ancient adopted aunt, would have the letter from Tamar to read, as well. Penny, Charlotte was sure, would call in sometime in the afternoon — as usual.

The thought of Tamar's young friend again descended like a storm-darkening sky. Charlotte's mind was over-borne by a troubling need to make a decision about the girl. Penny was pregnant. Charlotte never doubted Penny's word that it was Tamar's child she carried. The subject would have to be faced, brought into the open. Tomos, Gemima, would have to be told. Sybil, mercifully, was still away studying and nursing, in Perth. Sybil would have the most difficulty of them all to absorb, to accept, the truth of Penny's situation and to recognize the subsequent infant as being that of any relation of hers.

After Sophie's death, which was followed so soon by that of her father, Sybil had become as an island; had, like an island, developed her own, unique environment, had established her own set values out of her own thoughts, and to them she rigidly adhered.

A mental picture of her only daughter appeared to Charlotte: the firm, smooth line of her jaw, the pale blue of her eyes, the fair skin, dark blonde hair, the openly assessor engagement of her interlocutor whenever in serious discussion; the aura-like healthy vigour which emanated from her, body and mind.

Juxtaposing this figure of strength with the Busby girl, the comparison became almost ludicrous — until the viewer admitted to consciousness the realization that the comparison being attempted was that of the ordinary with the exceptional. Penny was ordinary yet Charlotte had no intention of entertaining any sense of disappointment over that. Most of the world, most of its inhabitants were ordinary, often painfully so — but for Penny, this would be a transitory state. She would become special, too, Charlotte was sure. The girl was becoming more special the more certainly Charlotte accepted her as the prospective grand-child-bearing vessel, the carrier of hers and Harry's seed. In time, Charlotte knew, she would love Penny as if she were really her own.

Charlotte's magnanimity however, she well knew, would not be enough to save Penny from the scorn of the local — or general — community.

3.

Hyde Park Hospital
Plymouth
England

Dear Mum

Just a line or two letting you know that I am well and ready to go out of Isolation any time now. We have been here for over three weeks now and you can see we are having a

good spell as well as a good time on the common old mumps. Forty one out of the sixty of us here are going out today and we have been giving them a bit of a 'send off' this morning by getting them down and painting their faces with Black lead. I received a letter from Sybil and you two days ago, they were written before we left Melbourne, I suppose there is a few letters waiting for me when I get to Salisbury Plains. Yesterday we were taken for a walk down to the Town Hall and it is a lovely building Mum, the pipe organ stands nearly as high as the York gums outside the back door. The windows are all painted with the Kings and Queens, and the Caretaker explained everything to us, it was very interesting. We were then taken down to Plymouth Hoe, which is also a beautiful place, and we saw the Boer War memorial as well as statues of Drake and Raleigh. We also saw the place where Sir Francis Drake was supposed to play bowls while the Spanish Armada was in sight. From Plymouth Hoe one can see the Eddystone Lighthouse, it is about 15 miles out. I was talking to a returned Australian yesterday and he said the war was good enough for another twelve months. Well Mum I think that this Spring is going to decide everything, we will be going into action about the Spring. Don't forget to give me Buggsy's full address so that I can write to him in Perth. Well Mum this is all the news I can think of for the time, so will now close.

I remain
Your loving
Tam

This was the letter that made Tamar's war a reality for Charlotte. She could picture herself as a young girl, in company with her father William Sommers, strolling on the very soil of Plymouth Hoe, "doing" the sights and straining her eyes seaward, searching for a glimpse of the Eddystone light. In her place now was her youngest son, already older that she was at the time she remembered.

Charlotte remembered too, how as a child of eleven her preoccupation then was the illness of her mother and the threat darkening her young world as a consequence. Now, it was the thought of her Tamar and of the "Spring Offensive" the newspaper was predicting ... as had her son.

Penny Busby drove the Busby's buggy over to Lower Meliot Farm every mail day now, the latest news of Tamar in prospect. On her arrival at the farm it was becoming an increasingly laborious business for her to alight from the cumbersome vehicle. Charlotte

usually was on hand to assist the girl. On Penny's report, the Busby family gave her little support — except for her old uncle Josh Pretty, a family supernumerary well past his prime who, in his declining years had attached himself to the Busbys — in return, it was said, for investing his life-savings in Busby's farm. Uncle Josh it was who harnessed the horse for Penny and handed her into the high buggy at the start of her regular journey.

Tomos appeared to resent the girl's presence whenever her visits co-incided with him being in the house. Mostly, he was away tending the animals in a far paddock; he might be driving the team horses, repairing machinery in the farm sheds, mending a fence, loading the wagon with produce preparatory to driving it into Zanger's grain store in the township.

Joel Zanger however, if he were near, would always find reason to return to the vicinity of the house when Penny arrived. Although he rarely spoke to the girl, he made certain he was seen by her. Joel's behaviour amused Charlotte and irritated Tomos.

The management of the farm was Tomos's obsession. Tamar's contribution to running the business and maintaining its assets had never been regarded by Tomos as a serious part of the operation. The advent of Joel — his "second coming" as he liked to think of the young man's return to Lower Meliot Farm — was something which Tomos had misgivings about. But Zanger was "helping out" by standing in place of Tamar on the farm.

4.

Sutton Vemy Camp

Warminster

Salisbury Plains

Jan 31st. 1918

Dear Mum

Just a few lines letting you know I am well and at Convalescent Camp on Salisbury Plains but I will be going back to my own Unit tomorrow at 10 o'clock. There are all men who have been wounded here and are ready to go back to France, I saw Barney Ross the other day he was wounded in the head but is ready to go back to France, I was also at the Pictures the other night with Harold Longman. I haven't seen Ken Williams yet but he is in the next camp to this, he is a Sergeant in the Pioneers. We get good food in this camp and no parades, so you can see I've been having a good spell out of the common old mumps. Well Mum the Australians must be the biggest dags in the world, there are some characters amongst them, stop at nothing. There was a picture show at this camp the other night and

the first film kept on breaking so someone set fire to it and they then pulled the piano out and started playing ‘Keep the Home Fires Burning’ and ‘Australia We’ll be There’, then they threw the piano into the fire, when the Fire Brigade came along they cut the hose in five different places. Well, Mum, it was the funniest thing I have ever seen, I simply roared laughing. Everyone is sick and tired of the War, they all want to go back to Aussie. I was speaking to a fellow who knows Bill Johnstone, he thinks Bill is going back to Aussie, he was reported missing but had turned up again. Well, Mum, this is all the news I can think of for the time so I will close.

I remain

Your loving ‘Fed up’

Tam

Australian Imperial Forces Abroad

Gemima listened in silence. Only once could she remember her Reggie in all his years of sitting patiently in his bootmaker’s cubby-hole at the little fishermen’s port, express anything which could be construed as being evidence in any sense of discontent. It was in a rare period of quiet when the boots and shoes of the township were in good repair, which left the industrious cobbler’s lasts temporarily idle and the cobbler time to lift his gaze. Gemima had no inkling of what it was her husband Reggie saw in his mind’s eye in that unaccustomed moment of respite and was all the more at a loss when he said to her: ‘We ought to have a piano, Gem,’ as he tidied the racks on which he kept the best pieces of cured and tanned hides. Someone had entered the bootmaker’s to collect a pair of shoes at this point — a customer who, on seeing Gemima there, stayed on for a gossipy chat — which meant that the subject of the piano was forgotten. It was not for years that Reggie’s words had resurfaced in Gemima’s mind — as they did again on hearing Tamar’s account of the soldier -Australians’ tomfoolery.

‘Why so wistful, Aunty Gem?’ enquired Charlotte.

The old lady did not reply immediately; but took a minute to regard her “ward” as she still sometimes laughingly referred to Charlotte. ‘You still are beautiful, Charlotte,’ she observed, quietly.

‘Flattery, Aunty Gem — at your age?’

‘It’s the truth. It’s no flattery. It’s just that someone has to say it. A girl needs a bit of reassurance, now and then — and you won’t get it from either Tomos or Joel — or anybody else out here at the end of the world.’

Gemima Capstock had spoken without rancour.

‘Do I hear a hint of elderly irascibility, this afternoon? Were you disturbed too early? I thought I’d be for it if I didn’t wake you for Tamar’s letter ... ‘

‘It’s too late now after all these years ... but for how long is it now? Never mind; I’ve been telling you, dear Charlotte, to fend for yourself and don’t worry about what you think I’ll do or feel. Any way ... it can’t be much longer, now. How long can a body last? As long as mine, obviously; but really ... this age thing is becoming a joke.’

‘Stop it! Stop it at once, Aunty Gem! What would I do without you!?’

‘Perhaps we should be looking forward to other things,’ Gemima agreed ignoring the question directed to her.

‘Such as ...?’ queried Charlotte, genuinely puzzled by what she heard.

‘Your grandchild, perhaps?’ the older woman replied in an air of calm certitude.

‘You ... you know!?’

‘Young Penny? Of course. What woman wouldn’t? I may be an old crone to some, but I do pride myself on being a knowledgeable old crone. I admit though to your superior experience in certain matters and I am relying on you to tell me when the little mite is due in the world.’

5.

Codford T.B.
Salisbury Plains
Eng
Feb 15th, 1918

Dear Mum,

I received your very welcome letter today of the 26th Nov, 1917, also one from Aunt Gemima. Well Mum I’m a bit wild about Stanbridge saying you were simply murdering me by letting me go and do my bit, you tell the long, malingering cow that I came to do my bit not bludge on the flag like him, he knew very well when he left Aussie that he would not be passed for Active Service, he was always doubled up with rheumatism and I can imagine him spouting at his reception what he did. I suppose he has been peeling spuds in the cook house here. Well Mum, I am well and I suppose by the time you get this letter I will be in

France having a smack at Fritz. I received a very nice Xmas card from Penny's mother also. You said that you were sending parcels but I have only received two packets of smokes so far, but I will get the others later, I hope. I saw Bert Cook who used to be at Kal. He has just come over. Arthur and all my mates are with me still, we haven't been separated yet, they are some of the whitest and we all intend to stick to one another. We have wet and dry canteens in this camp and plenty of concerts. Well, Mum, I am stumped for news so I will now close.

I remain
Your loving
Tam

PS. I have written to Penny Busby if you happen to see her.

Charlotte awoke. It was midnight or thereabouts. The house was still except for the companionable creaking of its timber adjusting to the changes in temperature as though in readiness for the chill of another cold pre-dawn moment. What was it that had snatched her from sleep so urgently, she wondered?

Codford Training Camp
Salisbury Plains
Eng
Feb 13th, 1918

Dear Penny,

Received your ever welcome letter of the 9th. Nov, also two from Mum and Tomos of Dec. 10th and 3rd. Everyone seems to be giving the Tennis and Cricket hell over there. We don't get Tennis here. All we get is stabbing chaff bags with a fixed bayonet and silly Physical Jerks. We have some Pommy Instructors here and they boss us around but we take no notice of the Dopey cows. Brumby is still a big fat porpoise, the mob call him 'Hodd', we were numbering off one day and the Instructor asked him what number he was and he said 'I'm a hodd number', we simply roared. Well, Penny, this is all the news I can think of for the present, so I will close now,

I remain
Your loving friend
Tamar Coates — Tam the Dinkum Soldier

A second letter addressed to Penny:

Codford Training Camp
Salisbury Plains
Eng
Feb. 20th. 1918

Dear Penny,

Just a few lines in answer to your letter of 23rd Nov.1917. I answered it about 2 weeks ago, but I hear today that the last boat load of Aussie mail was sunk. I am damn wild as I sent a lot of letters and souvenirs of the Panama Canal (which we came through) home, also a letter of 11 pages I wrote of the trip over from Aussie. We get plenty of drill here. I am on the Lewis machine gun now, I have been on it for a fortnight now, it is very interesting work. Brumby said he saw Sid Marshall a couple of days ago, Sid has turned out a real good fellow, different altogether now, he is in France by now I think. Brumby has got very fat, he can hardly look out of his eyes and also eats like a horse. I have seen Barney Ross and Harold Longman over here, Barney Ross has been wounded, but is ready to go back to the big stunt again. We had a night attack last night, they put salts or something in the tea. I was out fourteen times in the one night. Well Penny this is all the news I can think of for the time being so I will now close.

I remain

Your Loving Friend

‘Tamar, the Dinkum Soldier’

And another to Charlotte:

Codford A.I.F. Camp
Salisbury Plains
Eng.
Feb 26th.1918

Dear Mum,

Just a few lines letting you know that I am well. I had the last letter from you last week. Well Mum we’ve been on a Bombing Course this week, a good stunt, always do me.

The weather has been good lately. There seems to be a big Push brewing on the Western Front, I think we will get there for it. One can buy anything down at the village of Codford, it is a little place. One of my mates met with an accident yesterday, someone was fooling with a loaded rifle and the bullet went through his hand, smashed it all roads, I have just been down to see him, he is doing alright. Well Mum this is all the news I can think of for the time so I will now close.

I remain
Your loving
Tam

Charlotte read her son's letters from aboard as avidly as before but with an increasing sense of sadness. Ever since that autumn night when she had lain awake in the stillness of the early hours, listening in that stillness to the sounds of the world readying itself for the dawn, the young soldier's mother had lived with a sense of premonition. The arrival of each envelope bearing Tamar's writing was not respite for her from depression but now an endorsement to her of her fear.

By the time each letter from England, from France, reached Western Australia it was easily two months old. What might have happened in the intervening two months? Unlike Charlotte, Penny defiantly refused to be perturbed by the delays in mail deliveries, nor would she countenance any fore-bodings, despite her knowing, as did Charlotte, that by now Tamar would be in France, heading for the murderous muddy hell of the trenches.

It was Tomos who outwardly began to show signs of anxiety for news of the soldier's state of being. Charlotte was the first to notice the young man's growing preoccupation. Where formerly her eldest son would simply read or hear read Tamar's news from overseas and carry on with the business of the farm in his usual, practical, down to earth way, lately Tomos had stayed back with her. These days he liked to talk about Tamar: how he might feel; trying to see the outlook from Tamar's point of view; adopting what he imagined to be the motivation of the soldier; even attempting to envisage the Hun, to personify Fritz and to wonder about the identity of the German common man almost as concernedly as he did for his own.

'Better late than never, eh Mum?' Tomos responded, noticing Charlotte's surprise when in one extraordinary moment one day, on coming in late well after the mail had been read, he demanded to know: 'What news of my brave little brother?'

Charlotte noticed that Tomos's attitude towards Penny had changed, too; that now at least her elder son was talking to the girl whenever she appeared on Lower Meliot Farm — which was no less frequently than before. Tomos, however, had never once passed a single remark to anyone about Penny's increasingly-obvious pregnancy. Joel Zanger had tried to talk to him about it, had trialled a few lewd references to the girl and had come within a whisker of being branded with a fence post, had he only known it. Tomos knew very well who was responsible for Penny's condition. Who else but Tamar? To Tomos, it was a remarkable thing that Tamar hadn't "thrown one" long before he did, so often had he observed the couples' carryings-on.

When Tomos now spoke to Penny there was a degree of compassion in his words and the tone in which they were uttered that even amazed the already kindly-disposed Gemima.

'What do you think, Charlotte? What's the cause of this ... this ... well, I don't know ... change, I suppose, though I'm sure there's a better word to explain this astounding alteration in him.'

Charlotte didn't really care to discuss Tomos with anyone. The letter she dreaded, unknown to her, had already been written.

6.

A fragment of a letter written in England on March 24th, 1918

.Well Mum, we will be going over to the Big Push very shortly ... it will be the biggest battle in History, it will be either Fritz or us go under now. You said Tomos is busy organizing the shearing, tell him to keep on with the sheep before he pulls on this silly soldiering ... its enough to make everyone look a wreck ... that's why I am glad Conscription was turned down ...

7.

Blocker Jones standing on Crossthwaite's General Store verandah watching Reverend Syd Hockley heading out of town in his buggy, scornfully remarked to Gracie Grace: 'Yer'd think them mean bastards would have bought Syd a motor by now. The bloody

Methodists ‘a bought their bloke one, an’ yer know what a mealy mean, tight-fisted mob they are.’

‘Garn ... Syd’s very happy with his buggy. Only had it recent. Used to have to ride a bicycle to do his rounds,’ Kevin Grace explained. ‘Church bought the buggy for him so he could do his extra war work.’

‘Him!?! War work?’ exclaimed Blocker. ‘What the bloody hell war work is that?’ Jones scoffed.

‘Them ministers of religion are like crows, these days.’

‘How’d ya mean?’ Blocker queried sharply.

‘See one around you know something — or someone’s — dead. Ask Myrtle Cosgrove. First time in twenty years the Anglican bloke ever visited her was to tell her young Tony had copped it — shot in the guts in France.’

Blocker thought for a moment. ‘Yer mean Syd going off like that is on his way to tell ...?’

‘Yeah. And I bet he’s heading out to see Mrs Coates. Poor woman.’

‘Jeez ... so that oughta give us no chance in Sunday’s game, if yer’ right, eh Gracie!?’ Blocker returned, after a moment’s thought.

Pastor Sydney Hockley felt he was losing that joy of life that was so much a feature of his relationships with fellow members of his flock. Being the mouthpiece of undeniable and in many cases unbearable misery as often as he and his fellow ministers lately were was imposing a severe challenge to the joys of the Christ of whom he was meant to represent the present day embodiment. Pastor Hockley’s days seemed punctuated not by episodes of joy suffused with sweetness and light; but by weeping mothers, wives, sisters, sweethearts, grim-faced fathers and by brothers looking to their parent to show them how to be brave and weeping, too.

Arriving at Jensen’s Corner, Pastor Hockley drew on the reins and guided his smart rig off the track leading down the hill to the Coates farm, much of which he could see spread before him. Creeping doubts again revealed themselves. Was he equal to this war? Should he continue as the bringer of throbbingly real despair while offering in exchange only the ephemeral comfort of a supposed after-life — that in human terms bore no attraction for the young men daily being prematurely consigned to it?

‘Whoa there, Rachel!’ he called, bringing the buggy up close to a clump of jam-wattles. The mare once rested, Pastor reached for the small travelling case containing official papers

he carried in the buggy. Opening it, he took out the brown envelope containing the official message delivered to him in Northam earlier that morning as he sat at breakfast in the dining-room of Mrs Bellfor's Superior Lodging House.

Telegram

To Rev. S. Hockley

Northam

Officially reported 16/5/1918 that Pte T.W. Coates, 51st. Batt. died 8/5/1918 gunshot wounds Villers Bretonneux. Please inform mother Lower Meliot Farm Sapphire Valley.

Major Alexander Sheridan, C.5th. Military District

The young reverend gentleman read this message again, sighed, then placed the document in a waistcoat pocket from whence it could be withdrawn at the propitious moment — would there be a propitious moment? He prayed. No prayer of his on this subject though had ever been answered. Conveying news of death — to his Church and most others purporting it to be a joyous release — when the subject person was the barely-flowered young son of the family — was pure, unmitigated sweat for Pastor Hockley. As he drove down the hill, as he passed the roadside mailbox with the scratched and faded inscription “Lower Meliot Farm”, and slapped the reins at the beginning of the ascent which would take him up to the Coates house, Syd Hockley wondered again if he had chosen the right vocation; whether after all he should resign and join up, whether he should risk the decimation of the body for the salvation of his soul — and wondered some more if there really was this eternal celestial comfort ... if of course there was indeed a soul, in the first place.

Having passed the fork in the road where the right prong led to Coates's, the left to the Busby's farm, Hockley had been of a mind to pause again, remembering that it was Cecil, Seamus O'Reilly's eldest brother who had been the earliest lad in the district to volunteer as a Light Horseman. No, it had been Father Beauchamp who had delivered that blow to the O'Reillys. How proud that family had been of 'our Cecil' whose name was fast becoming legend in the local community, even though it had also become pretty common knowledge that Cecil had not died riding a horse but had expired exhausted in down-town Cairo surrounded by... well ...a mystery, so it was whispered. Hockley sighed again and put Rachel to the right fork of the track.

8.

‘Have you heard what’s going on? Tommo Coates is getting married! Talk about a shotgun job! Makin’ that Penny Busby an honest woman before she drops her little bundle! Tommo’s a fool. Who’s going to believe the little bastard is his? Of course it’s young Tamar’s that was. That Penny and him had been shagging ‘emselves silly for years. Everyone knows that. He probably joined up to give his back a rest.’

‘I think Tomos is being the whitest. Never mind what you think, Harris. By the time the little kid grows up, what’ll it matter whose he or she is? As long as it’s got a chance to grow up happy, what’s it matter? It’s going to be another human being. Let’s hope it’s a girl, that’s all. If it is, there’s a chance then that it won’t have to go off and get shot for nothing — unless it wants to.’

‘Jesus, Gracie! I didn’t have you down as one of them holy cows!’

‘Dunno what you mean, Blocker. Stands to bloody reason, doesn’t it? And you a farmer. I honestly don’t know yer. What do yer sell off in the Spring? I’ll tell yer. It’s yer surplus wethers and yer culls — not yer best breeding ewes. The women, Blocker, is what I mean — since we’re behavin’ like the animals. What have we done? Killed off our surplus blokes. They was lucky. We didn’t knacker ‘em first!’

‘But we’re civilized!’

‘Yer can tell yer Aunt Fanny about that one!’

9.

Somewhere in France

April 8th, 1918

Dear Mum,

Just a few lines to let you know that I am well. We are billeted in a bit of a French village. Arthur is cook today, he has just made a Bully Beef stew ... Fritz has been sending over an occasional one. How are they all at home? Well, Mum there is not a lot to say, but you know we are not allowed to say much. Plenty of mud here. Well, Mum, this is all the news I can think of so I will now close.

I remain

Your loving

Tam

N.B. I will give my address in my next letter as I am not too sure about it yet.

Somewhere in France

April 19th, 1918

Dear Mum

Just a few lines to let you know that we are having a fairly good time, we have plenty to eat and get a few rabbits now and then ...

‘Tamar goes on to say that he and his two mates — one of them this Arthur none of us seem to know much about, who must be someone Tam met on the boat, maybe, I don’t know ... anyway, they can hear a bit of skirmishing going on; but all is getting ready for the big battle which must come any day now.’

‘I bet Tam didn’t need any salts then to make him go fourteen times in one night!’

‘Nor would you, Zanger, you little shit!’

‘Tomos!’ This was Charlotte, shocked. Tomos didn’t care. He knew that he wasn’t the only person in the district who resented the Zangers. Old Reuben, Tomos had decided, cannily knew what was coming for him, once the Germans started to make inroads into the young and not so young men who, at the behest of this nation’s leaders and their propagandists, had allowed themselves to be thrown into the sights of German guns. Reuben Zanger, in terms of business at least, was a broken, spent force, all his customers but one having seen it their patriotic duty to desert him. Would Reuben Zanger survive? Who cared? Joel, his son, was presently in a safe berth, however ... as long as he had Charlotte as a protectress. How strange it was that, while his mother held a loyalty to young Zanger, that loyalty seemed to become more intense and strengthened, the nearer her Tamar, the baby of the family, got to the front line of the fighting. More strange it was that never once, in all his letters, had Tamar mentioned Joel Zanger. Yet Charlotte held on to the interloper as though he were some sort of memento — a memento of past, happier times? Tomos remained puzzled, whenever he thought deeply about this situation. Usually, though, he was to content himself with the feeling of being importuned by Joel Zanger’s presence and to steer as clear as he could away from that young man. Except when seasonal operations demanded all available hands to the wheel, Tomos and Joel went about separate tasks, meeting often only in the early morning and in the evenings and then, only at meal-times, when the work for the day would be discussed and decided upon.

Autumn was well under way on Lower Meliot Farm. In the eastern sky at dusk there were the gentling hues of evening, the sound of the rushing south wind's arrival in the York gum tops, the occasional bleating of an early lamb for its mother, inevitable-seeming crow noises and a view of bleached grasses barely covering the thirsting land. Charlotte had been unwell. Gathering the mail from the box a mile away at the property boundary was left to Tomos who was out preparing the Eighty acres for cropping when it arrived:

Military Forces of the Commonwealth

District Headquarters, Swan Barracks. 6/6/1918

Dear Madam.

In confirmation of my telegraphic advice it is with sincere regret that I have to inform you that your son Pte. Tamar William Coates is officially reported to have died from the effects of gunshot wounds at Villers Bretonneux, France.

I am directed to convey the sympathies of Their Majesties the King and Queen and of the Commonwealth of Australia in the loss that you and the Army have sustained by the death of this soldier ...

Was there any point in knowing who had signed the letter? Tamar was dead. Dead! Suddenly, Charlotte's thoughts were filled with memories of her husband Harry, of Sophie and the tragedy which surrounded their deaths. Was it now her turn, after Tamar's? Did she really understand, now? Did she really know how Harry had felt ... now? Charlotte sensed she had been dying from the moment her premonitions had been aroused, that night months ago when from the depths of sleep, she later realized it was Tamar who had disturbed her; that it was Tamar calling, wonderingly hurt.

CHAPTER Twenty

A Sunday before the rains (a co-incidence, let me add, lest it be thought the act to be collusive with higher authority) I confidently devoted to planning. Then, when the rains followed so adventitiously, I set about the scarifying bit as my opening gambit with the weather, almost happily — even though I knew that a cocky of greater experience than myself would be ever-cautious and accept heaven-sent bounty always realizing that somewhere down the track the favour would be called in.

That season, I drove that tractor almost until the wheels fell off it; until I could not bear to sit on the thing, but stood for hours driving the beast round and round so many paddocks I had to stop to remember where I was. The reason I couldn't sit down was due to an incipient stomach ulcer which I subdued with bi-carbonate of soda and some chalky goo given me by a neighbour, who had had the same problem. I couldn't eat, and during the last week of seeding, even drinking became difficult. But around and around I went, living off diesel exhaust fumes and imagination.

Finally, all the seeds subject to my plan were nestled safely in the ground; the last bag of seed grain had been fertilised and tucked away in the good earth. Then it rained — ominously, just enough. The sun then came out, right on cue, followed by more rain, more sunshine and so on, throughout the season.

Years previously, Father had bought an American harvester — a machine which, contrary to the Australian practice, gobbled up the straw from a height of two or three inches upwards, sorted out the seed from the rubbish and threw out the latter in great windrows behind it. It was a tremendous principle; but when it came to harvesting acreages, it was abominably and dangerously slow; threatening, because of the almost invariable late harvest-time thunderstorms which tended so often to end the reaping season. During the share-cropping, when this machine had stood idle a couple of years, it was coveted by a pea-farmer in the south-west and sold to reduce repayment commitments. In the great scheming of things, it was recognized that another header would have to be bought, so allowance for this was made., in the form of a reserve deposit for its purchase.

Perfect progress continued. Any ewe capable of nurturing another lamb was pressed into service. Never had the rams run so lean. I even yarded the hitherto shy sheep in the yards at night, to conserve the rams' energy. Wool prices were good, so each sheep received the best in fodder the paddocks and grain stocks would allow. I even fed them my

petty-cash oats. Meat prices were good and that combined with a marketing strategy I'd been working on for a couple of seasons would guarantee top prices for the fat lambs also running with the flock, un-accounted for in the annual budget. More sheep were shorn than ever before — which meant, too, that after shearing, we turned off more culls than had ever been the case. There remained but the harvest.

It seemed nothing would beat us. The plan was spot on. When the as-good-as-new secondhand header cut its first swathe around the oat crop, we knew that as long as the weather held, we were on a winner. Some of the tension began to relax in me. The weather held OK. It was the header that fell to bits, about twice a day. By the end of the harvest, I had replaced almost everything on it except the maker's decals. Exhausted, I then made perhaps the best suggestion of my life — best, because it was taken up with such speed and enthusiasm. (Had I known the ground beneath me was that thin, I might have given up earlier!) When in disgust at the manufacturer of that harvester, the pain in my guts and a head that had never really stopped aching, I said: "Let's sell out. Sell the fucking place!", Father had sold us up to a neighbour in less than half an hour! Sic transit gloria mundi!

* * * * *

Now that Penny's time was so near, her old Uncle Josh had decided that he should accompany her whenever she visited Charlotte. They made an odd couple, with the heavily pregnant girl helping the old man up into and out of the buggy.

At last Tomos took pity on Penny and would come to the house to assist both her and her Uncle Josh whenever he could. Joel Zanger now held back from such duty, however, whereas Charlotte officiated in the task whenever her son was elsewhere about the farm.

Uncle Josh had been a miner in Cornwall, like Harry Coates. As an early immigrant he had participated in the goldrush days of the Colony and, it was thought, he had made good money at it, money old gentleman had invested in his brother-in-law's farm in return for a place to which retire among familiar company. In the early days, Uncle Josh Pretty was a not infrequent visitor to Lower Meliot Farm. Harry and Josh seemed to find bonds besides the natural links of common experience. But since the death of Harry, Charlotte had seen very little of the man.

"Young Beryl" as Uncle Josh referred to her, had sent a cake over to the Coates's today along with her apologies, yet again, for being unable to visit, herself.

'Young Beryl be poorly today again,' Uncle Josh repeated. Beryl Busby was a semi-invalid who suffered badly with a leg deformed in an accident with a horse years ago. 'Me?

I be no spring chicken. A late autumn old rooster, me. You don't hear me crowin' of a mornin' too often. But fine,' Josh would reply to the habitual enquiry as to the state of his health. 'When young Pen here lays her egg is what I be waiting for, these days,' the ancient avuncular added this morning on alighting from his high-seated perch, his feet once again on terra firma.

'Aren't we all.' Penny winced at the strain of descending to the ground.

'Where be Tomos this morning — or that Jew boy?' Uncle Josh querulously demanded to know, on seeing his young niece's laboured exit from the buggy, despite Charlotte's helping hand.

'Tomos is crutching the sheep today — and I suppose Joel is helping him.' Charlotte supplied over her shoulder as she busied herself with Penny. 'Penny,' she offered, as neutrally as she knew how: 'It's probably time you gave up running around in this buggy. It's too high for you now ...'

'You are probably right, Mrs Coates ...' the mother-to-be returned rather mournfully, but ...'

Charlotte embraced the girl briefly, murmured an elliptical, 'I know ...' then, as a confederacy the two women arm in arm, followed by tottery Uncle Josh, entered the house yard and subsequently the kitchen where Charlotte, somewhat surprised by an earlier omission of hers, relieved Uncle Josh of the cake tin he had carried in from the buggy and seated the old gentleman in the visitor's chair now in its winter position nearer the fire.

'Is Tom coming in?' Uncle Josh asked, accepting the cup of tea placed beside him on the low table provided for visitors.

'He usually does come up about this time — though he'd rather not come into the house until he has bathed. When he does come, I'll take his morning tea out onto the side verandah. It's sunny there, most mornings, and quite warm.'

The old man said nothing more for the moment. He sat back, his cup in one hand raised to his lips, the other with saucer raised beneath to catch any spillage while he soberly and noisily sucked up the steamy beverage into the aperture between his nicotine-stained moustache and snowy beard.

'When he comes, I want to see him,' Uncle Josh interjected some time later.

'Who?' queried Gemima Capstock having only just emerged from other regions of the house. She was presently unaware of recent history in the kitchen.

'Who's that? Ah! It's you. Tomos.'

‘It’s all right, Aunty Gem: Uncle Josh wants to see Tomos when he comes up from the shed.’ Charlotte explained. ‘Tea?’

Tomos and Joel Zanger could be heard washing up in the lean-to. This was the signal to pour boiling water into the teapot standing on the tray already prepared for the men, to take up the tray and, after inviting Uncle Josh to follow her, to make to deliver it laden with eatables besides, to the verandah. Complainingly, old Josh shuffled after her.

‘Nice morning,’ Josh remarked, seating himself uninvited in the second of two chairs next to a rickety table where Charlotte had placed the tray before returning to the ladies in the kitchen.

Tomos had been already seated; Joel was slower in appearing so happily enough took his tea and cake and a seat on an old tree-stump in the garden, enjoying the streaming morning sunshine, fortuitously out of earshot.

Joel did, however, notice the old man, after a few minutes of conversation, pass something to Tomos. The object in question was an envelope; but except that it was brown, no other detail was available to the young man. When, on the legitimate pretext of re-filling his tea-mug Joel joined the men, they as of accord fell silent, only resuming their conversation when Joel moved away.

For some days after Uncle Josh’s visit to Lower Meliot Farm, Tomos was withdrawn even more than usually, sent his apologies to the annual general meeting of the Grasshoppers Cricket Club, gently declined Sunday lunch with Catherine and Hugh Brady and stayed away from the farmhouse almost from dawn till dusk. It was left to Joel to tend the poultry and the milk cow and to look after the big-hearted draught animals

Charlotte’s eldest and now only son however returned to the company of other humans on the following mail day, when Penny Busby, her routine not interrupted by Tamar’s death, continued to visit in expectation of further news of the father of her child. Gemima was staggered that the girl was driving that buggy about on her own; thought that Penny should be away at Northam, “lying in”. But Penny, naturally, had also heard of so many stories about men, soldiers, once having been posted dead, who had somehow turned up alive again, sometimes months after their families had received the terrible news. The girl was not to know that those reports of killings came from unofficial sources for the most part, from mates who thought this or that, or from subsequently-proven dubious “eye-

witness” accounts. Very few men had “returned from the dead” whose families had received official notification of their demise.

Charlotte was glad to have Tomos at least back with her. Indeed, was relieved — then surprised — about the time he spent with Penny on her arrival.

Knowing the pair were in conversation and being disinclined to interfere, Charlotte, as she effected as a rule, did not go out to meet the Busby buggy as it arrived; but, intrigued, returned to her kitchen to await developments, enjoining Gemima Capstock to also remain in the house.

Nothing was said when Penny, assisted rather ceremoniously by Tomos, came into the kitchen. His handsome face wore a defensive solemnity ... and what? Did he nod to Penny as he went out into the yard once more? Charlotte knew for certain something important was in the wind. Her Tomos, his mother knew, departed from his habitual emotional concealment only when decisions had been made: not when they were only half-fashioned!

Today Penny seemed quieter than usual and said nothing unless she was addressed directly.

When Gemima asked again of her: ‘How many weeks now, m’lassie?’ the girl burst into tears and for a time was inconsolable.

‘Penny, love!’ Charlotte rushed to her: ‘What is it?’

‘Tomos ...’ was all the girl could say.

‘Tomos?’ Charlotte repeated in her bewilderment: ‘What has Tomos got to do with anything? Has he been ...?’

‘No!’ blubbed the girl, ‘It’s not like that at all ... not like him at all ... I don’t ...’

‘Oh! Come on, Pen,’ interposed Gemima, losing something of her customary patience: ‘What has Tomos of all people done?’

‘He’s ... he wants to ... marry me!’

A startled ‘Why!?’ escaped from the old lady’s lips before she, with almost palpable deliberation, forced herself into silence.

Charlotte was speechless. Of all the things she imagined Tomos might have said, proposing marriage to his brother’s “spoiled” sweetheart was never among them. Yet, the mother knew her son. She knew that he would not have taken this course without a firm belief that it was a right direction for him. Why? Tomos of course loved his younger brother’s memory and no doubt wished to preserve his love for Tamar. But to propose marriage to Penny Busby? The whirling thoughts in Charlotte’s brain confused her.

‘How sweet!’ Charlotte heard Aunty Gem declare. ‘When?’ the ever-practical old lady demanded to know.

‘Soon ... next week ... as soon as he can arrange it. He is going in to see Pastor Hockley this afternoon ... has gone, I think.’

‘Ah-hem. How romantic,’ Aunty Gem trialled.

‘It’s not, really, Mrs Capstock. We don’t ... don’t love each other. It’s just that Tomos wants this ...’ and here Penny broke off to gently rub her protruding stomach with both hands; ‘He wants this to be a Coates, and I said it is so that’s fair, I suppose. Mrs Coates, would you mind if I lay down somewhere? I need a bit of a rest.’

‘Of course, love. Come, we’ll just pop into the next room. There’s a couch in there.’

‘Well. There you are,’ Charlotte said wonderingly to Gemima Capstock as she re-entered the kitchen, having set Penny up on the divan in the sitting room.

‘Did you ever?’ Gemima responded with a chuckle. ‘You, young Charlotte Sommers as was ... to be a real grandmother after all!’

‘Only just — and then, if I’m lucky. Let’s hope Penny holds off for the week,’ said Charlotte as if out of a veil of trance.

CHAPTER Twenty-one

'Jack: this is me mate,' was all Jack Chong and I had between us by way of introduction: Gordon was too excited by the prospect of occupying what turned out to be Jack's one-time commercial laundry. Before that, I was later told, our home had been a lemonade factory. Now, or until earlier this morning, our quarters had been Jack's depository for anything that over the years he thought might come in handy at a later date. Well, the table and the safe and the beds did; the rest we helped him pile in corners or stack outside in a miserable, askew -to re-shaped in the last cyclone to ricochet and die in the district.

I found Gordon's elation a little puzzling. Our new home was a dump. We each had a bedroom which, I supposed, was an improvement over the pub; but this fact alone seemed hardly to equate with the level of enthusiasm Gordon mustered to get us moved in. There were still damp patches noticeable behind each of my ears, then, which enabled me to dismiss my receptor's warnings as nothing more than atmospheric static — so I did.

Lying in bed the following Sunday morning, luxuriating in the crisp stillness of the dawn, a poet's heart came through the cracked window pane and struck me all at once as the first ray of a new day's golden sunlight reached the inner wall. I reached for my pen and wrote in my notebook the following opening line:

"When indigo turns to violet, then blue, shot through with gold ..."

I had just begun the next when I became conscious of terrible sounds, becoming louder, emanating from behind the closed door between my room and Gordon's. There was much thrashing about, moaning, grunting in it — but no teeth-grindings. The man must be ill! After all, he who goes to bed with a case of Penfolds or anything else like it under his mattress for mid-sleep recharges must surely only last so long. I thought for a moment more then jumped out of bed, threw open the door, stared, then shut it quickly enough, I hoped, for my intrusion to be not noticed. I returned to my bed to assess what I had just seen. What had I seen? I had just been eyed by the biggest, whitest, fattest naked backside I had ever seen in the flesh. Protruding from beneath it were a pair of scrawny, hairy legs which I could only assume belonged to Gordon. The backside was certainly not his. I imagined what the view from the other end might have been and felt suffocated. I started! Perhaps Gordon was being smothered! Well, thought I, if the lady were to be proportionate in her measurements, then Gordon's fate was in hands of the gods. Lily-white breasts of such magnitude could well prove fatal. I dressed, made the lovers a cup of tea which I left on the hob, then walked down to the

shop where I was able to buy the previous day's newspaper which of course was the latest available

'He's right,' put in Bertha, Jack's woman: 'Theys wanna kick us old uns out but Jack won't let 'em,' she chuckled.

Bertha was a dark-skinned lady, probably part-Aboriginal. She and Jack had been together since Adam and Eve, apparently: no one I spoke to could remember them otherwise. She was a fairly substantial person, about five feet high who could find a giggle in most things. Bertha was the main bread-winner, these days, so she told me. She did the laundry down at The Commercial. It was she who was responsible for that perfectly white, rigidly starched linen I remembered that had graced the tables of that establishment during the days of my stay there.

Only once do I recall Bertha being less than cheerful. It was the day I called in to pay my rent, when I found her sitting disconsolate in an old, once leather-covered rocker on the back verandah. I could tell by looking at her that something was wrong, so asked what I could do to help. 'Nothing,' she replied, as she heaved herself upright. 'Come an' 'ave a look.' She led me inside.

'It's time for my lie down an' I can't,' she said. I wondered why.

Bertha took me into her bedroom. There was a double bed, un-made. An ocean of bedclothes obscured anything else from my view. 'What's the problem?' I asked.

'There!' Surprised at my failure to understand, she pointed to something on the bed. Still I did not notice anything. 'Come on,' Bertha urged, 'Don't be shy!' at last, favouring me with that familiar chuckle. That did it. The Rhode Island Red chook nesting hidden in the folds of the bedclothes could not resist Bertha's mirth, either. It answered her chortle in almost the same language.

Still, I didn't grasp the full import of the situation and asked Bertha to explain, to which she replied: 'The damned chooky is in my bed an' I can't 'ave me afternoon sleeps!' 'Can't you throw her out?' I asked, with rapier-like perspicacity. 'Not if I want the hegg she's layin'' Bertha responded. I perceived the extent of the problem at once.

* * * * *

1.

Tremendous consternation in the horse paddock! Leo, the lead horse of the team led a thunderous retreat to the far edge of the field and with his fellow geldings stood with head

and ears erect, watchfully regarding the progress of the strange yellow vehicle crawling along the perimeter track as it made its noisy approach to the farmhouse.

The hissing Talbot was Uncle Josh's wedding present to Penny. With Tomos at the wheel in leather jacket and gloves, his hat pulled low on his brow above rather over-size tinted goggles, the car did a double lap of the house yard. Penny, beside the driver beaming happily, hugging a little bundle to her breast with one hand, created blasts of terror by repeatedly squeezing the rubber bulb of the vehicle's hooter.

"Tamar's" Penny is back.' Gemima observed happily — but never to be heard above the present din. Charlotte, knuckles pressed to her lips, could do little more than pivot on the spot, the long skirt of her day dress billowing out as she followed with shining gaze the sight of her Tomos in a cloud of dust, his jaw set, guiding the straining motor car's gyrations. Joel Zanger simply looked on, greedily devouring the sight before him of this latest in modern transport.

'We thought we would call him "Harry". That is, if you don't mind, Mrs Coates,' said Penny, transferring the little one almost obscured in a swathe of shawls to Charlotte's eager care as the latest Mrs Coates marked her inaugural presence on Lower Meliot Farm. Charlotte's enthusiasm faltered. She looked down at the minute features of the child, recovered, and without taking her eyes from the baby said gently: 'Call him what you like, dear Penny. He's beautiful!'

'Of course he is ... he's ... he's a boy.' Penny managed to convert her intended rejoinder into a non-committal platitude.

'Good girl, Pen ... and now you'd better call me 'Ma', the same as Tomos does. Come.' Charlotte continued. 'Let's go and show off our precious young Harry Coates to his Aunty Gem!'

2.

The war ended. The stricken world stretched tearfully to accommodate the reality of what it had done; absorbed or abandoned the casualties of its past actions; the guilty accepting no sentence, the blameless and the blame-worthy inventing glory as a worthwhile recompense for the slaughter. Young survivors returned to the shops and factories and farms and took up routine drudgeries again, their minds and, in many instances their bodies as well, indelibly altered.

Joel Zanger returned to his father, more or less unscathed in a personal sense; but the young man left the Coates's farm at the insistence of Tomos. In making his request known, however, Tomos showed none of the forthrightness of Catherine, years back, sending the Busby boys packing. Charlotte's son left it to his mother to dismiss Joel Zanger which, after much soul-searching, she effected by making the assumptive proposition to him that with the war over Reuben, Joel Zanger's father, would be wanting to re-establish his agency business and would need all the assistance he could muster.

Joel was astute enough to appreciate this transparency though outwardly, to Charlotte at least, was happy enough to leave Lower Meliot Farm. Tomos was happy also, to the point of being relieved to see the back of that young man — a state of things a mystery, Charlotte noted, but one she could not begin to understand. Did it matter to her? There was another Harry Coates now to engage her attention and it was to that young man's demands she was presently attuned. Time would soon enough bring Tomos's problems — if he had any — into open debate.

After the birth of her first baby, the youthful, uncomplicated Penny seemed to spring back into the active, always busy ways of life normal for her. Within six weeks of marriage, she had learned to drive the yellow Talbot and in it, she was constantly back and forth to the Busbys, sometimes young Harry carefully wrapped in shawls on the seat beside her, at other times ferrying her Uncle Josh on visits, or taking Aunty Gem "for a spin".

Charlotte found Penny's driving proficiency wonderful; she could be taken over to Jensen's to visit Catherine and Hugh Brady — and Catherine's little girl, Sussanah, just a month older than Harry. And then there was Mrs Jensen. Elated, Charlotte had never known such social interaction.

As her daughter-in-law became more confident in her driving, so her range beyond the immediate district expanded; though it was Tomos who first drove the Talbot as far as York. Thereafter, with Charlotte beside her, sometimes with Gemima and Uncle Josh in the seat behind, Penny launched herself into the freedom of a previously unknown world of little excitements and a series of broader social contacts. "That young Coates woman" became the talk of the district — Tomos, for marrying her in the first place, already was.

The heat of that summer was more than usually trying. The harvest had been the best ever recorded on Lower Meliot Farm. Prices were good. Demand for wool was not

spectacular and meat prices were only average; but for what there was lacking in value was made up for in quantity. The productivity of the farm had never been better.

It was in that February of 1919 that a strange letter arrived addressed by some meticulous hand in faultless copperplate to:

“ Harry Coates, Esq.,
 Lower Meliot Farm,
 Sapphire Valley,
 via Northam,
 Western Australia.”

Cornish Harry’s brother, Thomas: was it twenty years ago or longer — Charlotte could not recall — that “Uncle Tom” was last heard from? A schoolteacher, if she remembered correctly, he went to South Australia — wrote, saying he might one day come West — never did — didn’t ever write — was forgotten about — especially after Harry died. Tom ... Thomas Coates. There was a sister, too — Brenda? — no ... Belinda ... yes, Belinda. I wonder ... doesn’t matter. That was years ago — surprised that Thomas ... he must be, let’s see ... Harry would be ... born in ‘59 ... he’d be sixty. Thomas was three or four years younger, I think; perhaps as young as ... silly old thing! You are fifty-four yourself! What does he say?

Charlotte exited from her reverie to take up again the letter from Thomas Coates. In the yellow light cast by the kerosene lamp she had no difficulty reading the faultlessly inscribed lines:

“I shall be travelling to Perth by the Transcontinental The town of Northam, I understand — and this from the only letter I received in Adelaide from you, brother Harry — is quite near to your farm? I plan to alight at Northam, whatever comes, and spend a day of two in the town and district. I would be delighted if I were to have the opportunity of meeting you and the children — two girls and two boys, I think you said.

In any case, I shall have spent a week at Kalgoorlie, making contact with my business partner there on the 25th of next month. I shall be staying at the Royal Exchange Hotel. I would be truly grateful were you to write to me there with details of your present circumstances and confirming the suitability of my intention to visit you.

I remain,

Your loving brother, Thomas Coates.”

3.

A raging violent local thunderstorm had dumped inches of rain and turned the normally dusty track down from Jensen's Corner into a river-bed. Water coursed in a torrent down the wheel-ruts into the low-lying paddocks of the Coates property, in its rushing progress sweeping away topsoil from the hillside and depositing it as muddy slush in the broad depression further down at the bottom of the gentle rise where the road forked.

The valiant Talbot bearing Uncle Thomas, after bumping down the washed out track from Jensen's corner, seemed to lose heart at the muddy prospect before it at the bottom of the hill and water-logged, coughed and expired in the middle of a slushy pool, leaving its driver and passenger no other course but to take off their boots, roll up their trouser legs, dismount and heave themselves through the mire to higher ground.

Penny had been watching through Aunty Gem's binoculars the Talbot's descent from Jensen's corner. She saw it come to rest in the creek and in minutes was on her way to the rescue in the sulky already harnessed to the mare and waiting. Despite her bashfulness in the presence of the strange, elderly man with her husband — both men serious-faced in defence against appearing absolutely ridiculous — Penny's laughter at closer sight of them bubbled up as an effervescent fountain might defy restraint.

Tomos feigned shock — mostly for the benefit of his stranger-uncle, though on perceiving his relative's humorous reception of his situation, he too, relaxed and all three laughed together.

'Uncle,' said Tomos, inviting that gentleman to climb up into the buggy beside Penny, he following then squeezing himself into the boot behind the double seat. 'Drive on, wife!' cried Tomos happily as Penny, having turned the vehicle, snapped the reins and headed up the rise towards the farmhouse.

'So this young lady is your wife, Tomos?' enquired the dapper elderly man laughingly. 'Thomas Coates, my dear: your uncle by marriage, it seems!' he said, extending his hand to the girl.

Penny blushed but studiously kept her eyes fixed on the road ahead. 'Tomos!' she growled.

'Excuse him, my dear. A young man of his age doesn't get to meet a lost uncle everyday,' the older man suggested to her smilingly — and changed the subject in order to

satisfy his curiosity, asking: 'How did you happen to come to our rescue? Your appearance with the buggy seemed miraculous.'

'From our kitchen window, have no doubt, Uncle Thomas, our every move was monitored the moment we turned at Jensen's Corner.'

'Jensen's Corner? That was by the little school-building standing out on its own ...?'

'That's the one.'

'I see.'

'Yes. Old Auntie Gem still has her binoculars — and still uses them, what's more, even though she must be eighty. at least.'

'Eighty-two,' Penny supplied laconically.

Horse and buggy continued its progress, the sound of wheel and foot-fall muted in the rain-softened earth.

'I don't think I've heard of your Auntie Gem,' Thomas observed.

'Auntie Gem came to live with us permanently, when Dad died,' Tomos replied without any special emphasis.

'A family friend? But anyway, Tomos, I haven't even met your mother, yet. I look forward to it. Ah! The house.'

At that moment, the sprawling homestead of Lower Meliot Farm came into view: the house among the tall eucalypts, the stone barn, the stables and the clutter of small buildings that familiarly surround the centre of well-developed farmsteads.

'How charming!' exclaimed Uncle Thomas, clearly impressed by this improvement upon his expectations. Charlotte had told him of his brother's death and that of the girl, Sophie, in her letter in which she had encouraged Thomas to visit Lower Meliot Farm and to meet his Australian relatives. Sybil, his niece, Charlotte had said, was still away. Sybil had not returned from Perth where, she being a nurse, her services were still needed by returning soldiers whose wounds were yet to heal.

Tomos had impressed his uncle. The young man's tall, lean figure, dark eyes and hair, his strong jaw, giving out an aura of solidarity Thomas Coates found appealing. Uncle Thomas's admiration for his nephew might have been absolute were it not for a certain equivocal sensuality about the boy's mouth which aroused a sense of caution in the mind a keen and experienced observer of mankind. Thomas Coates was reluctant therefore to entirely accept as gospel his first impressions of the young squire of Lower Meliot.

No such doubt attached to the older man's concept of Penny whose face, he adjudged to be a reflection of a kind, simple, genuine, fun-loving uncomplicated person at the height of her youthful vigour, confident of her equal-ness in the world.

Harry's Charlotte was much as Thomas expected her to be — of medium stature, plump, comfortable-looking, clearly a capable manager; but generally conciliatory in expressing her opinions. Her face, to Thomas, shone with a kindliness, too. Anxieties of past years had etched themselves a fine tracery about her eyes which today did not detract from the reflection of mature, quasi- beauty the middle-aged woman possessed. Withered Gemima Capstock, on the other hand, he found to be an un-pretty sight, although after five minutes of conversation with the grand dame, Thomas understood entirely why in this household she was loved and held in such high esteem. Gemima Capstock, the visitor could tell, had been the rock upon which this little community of people had fastened, recovered and grown strong.

It was the third day of his visit, when, in company with another ancient, Uncle Josh Busby, the family was taking afternoon tea on the sheltered side verandah, away from the glare of the afternoon. Something, some remark of old Josh's — whose remarks mostly were referent to times passed — awoke a memory, something Harry long ago had mentioned in one of his few letters. There was a girl, another child, a child for whom Harry acted as guardian — her name, her name! What was her name ...?

'I'm sorry, Uncle Josh — I was miles away — sorry. You were saying ...?'

'I was saying it's a good job Tomos made an honest woman outa our Penny.'

'You old scoundrel, Josh Busby! You weren't saying anything of the sort!' fumed Aunty Gem.

'I was thinking it!' was the old man's rejoinder.

'Don't worry, Uncle Thomas. Uncle Josh likes his little joke — and to make other people uncomfortable!' Tomos interposed.

'Oh! Does he now?'

'You know you do! Remember how he used to chialk Catherine about Hugh when they were courting, if ever they happened to run into him?'

'And still gives Clarke Jensen hell, whenever he gets the chance.'

'Wicked old man!' Gemima Capstock pronounced lovingly.

That was it! Thomas felt certain. “Catherine”: that was the name Harry had used to refer to his ... well, was it “ward”? Almost involuntarily, Thomas interrupted the banter gathering in riotousness across the tea things. ‘Catherine!’ he exclaimed aloud.

At once, the visitor not only saw but felt every eye of the company fixed upon him. Silence descended and banked down the hilarity as effectively as might a thrown bucketful of cold water.

The irrepressible Uncle Josh it was who spoke first. ‘Catherine?’ he squawked, ‘You should ask Tomos about Catherine. He knows all about Catherine!’

‘Tomos? Why should he — begging your pardon, Uncle Tom — why should Uncle Tom ask Tomos especially about Catherine?’ Charlotte demanded.

Delighted, old Josh Busby chortled: ‘Ask him!’, at the same time nodding his head in Tomos’s direction.

‘Enough!’ this from Gemima Capstock. With her infallible nose for crisis and threat she could see the pressure gauge of the family boiler rising imminently to red.

Into this temporary hiatus Thomas Coates thrust a hasty apology, excused himself from the table on the pretext of needing exercise and went off to talk to Leo the draught horse that on three legs rested in the shade of the York gums leaning their branches over the fence into his domain.

Tomos likewise extemporized a pretence for deserting the side verandah and headed for the stables behind the stone barn.

Penny shrugged. Charlotte’s un-asked question had been directed at her. ‘I know nothing about whatever it is ... ‘

‘Charlotte is wondering what ... what are you getting at, Josh Busby, you mischief-making old ... ‘

‘Me? Old? Compared to thee, old chook I’m barely a cockerel!’

‘Take him home, Penny love, before he ends up where all surplus cockerels finish their crowing — in the pot!’ pleaded Charlotte in good humour, on noticing Gemima puffing herself up to deliver the metaphoric axe blow to old Josh’s neck.

‘Come along, me dear old relative. There be no perch for ‘ee ‘ere,’ mocked Penny, affectionately helping the old man to his feet and steering him down the verandah steps to where the now shiny-clean Talbot waited beneath its lean-to garage.

‘Shall I wake Harry, Penny dear?’ Charlotte enquired hopefully, as Penny started the Talbot.

‘Have you found a wet-nurse for the little devil. Grandma? Better not. I’ll be back, like a shot,’ Penny replied, pretending to weigh her full breasts in her cupped hands: ‘I need Harry as much as he needs me!’

‘Vulgar hussy,’ old Gemima giggled.

Together in silence, the women watched the Talbot reach the fork in the road then lead off towards the Busbys’.

CHAPTER Twenty-two

Because of a bureaucratic over-sight, I found myself next in Kalgoorlie. Everyone seems to have been born there, has relatives in the town, grew up there, visited it when they were children or owes his or her present circumstance at least in part to that golden town or to its all-time cohort, Boulder. It was — and presumably still is — somewhere where the inhabitants all must have well-defined reasons for coming to, and, once having come, staying at.

“How do you come to be living in Kalgoorlie/Boulder?” is still a reasonable question to ask any denizen of the ‘fields. A Police Department typist’s mistake threw me into the Goldfield’s pot. But that’s another story.

* * * * *

1.

A wonderful air of elation pervaded the house. Barely settled from the arrival in their midst of Uncle Thomas, now word had been received via Clarke Jensen who had been at the Valley post office when the telegram arrived and had most happily brought this latest good news. Sybil was to be on Saturday’s train .

Uncle Thomas, on hearing this word of his niece, had very willingly agreed to wait on over the weekend rather than go on to Perth, as he had planned to do by train that Saturday.

The whole family would assemble. Catherine and Hugh Brady would be there with little Susannah. Penny’s Uncle Josh was to be invited as well, however much against Tomos’s mild objection. Sybil, of course ... and despite Charlotte’s misgiving — Clarke Jensen would be a special guest — as a friend of Hugh Brady’s, it went without saying. A secondary reason for inviting the Jensen boy might be to wish him well before he left for Melbourne where, it was thought, Clarke would take up a cadet-ship with a firm architects, he having decided to forswear the farming life, at last.

The hissing Talbot huffed into the East Northam railway yard just as the steam train, a mixed passenger and goods service from Perth, screeched to a halt beside the gravelled station platform.

Thomas Coates had accompanied his sister-in-law in the car and with the two women formed the welcoming party. At first, neither Charlotte not Penny saw the two passengers alight from their carriage; their searching eyes having passed over the pair in expectation of recognizing just one, and that, a young lady. As Charlotte peered into the milling group of

people moving about excitedly on the platform, she heard behind her Penny's sudden surprised exclamation of Sybil's name. Charlotte's own surprise was doubled:

'Sybil, darling and ... and Rosa! How delightful! Dear Rosa, so unexpected!' cried Charlotte, speaking over her daughter's shoulder as she hugged Sybil close. Soon, it was the older of the two arrivals' turn to be enveloped in Charlotte's arms. Less demonstratively, Penny meanwhile shyly let herself into Sybil's embrace. Thomas Coates stood by spare until the first flush of feminine fervour subsided, aware that he had been overlooked, then coughed gently.

'Uncle Tom! Forgive me! Tom, this is my daughter, Sybil ... and this surprise is dear Rosa, my oldest friend and niece of Auntie Gem's. Sybil, Rosa: this is our Uncle Thomas Coates — your father's brother, Sybil. Oh! And Rosa!, this young lady is Sybil's sister-in-law and my newest daughter Penny. Penny dear: Mrs Reverend Joshua Samuels — but do call her ... perhaps Auntie Rosa?'

'Delighted to meet you both — but "Rosa" will be fine,' Rosa insisted, kissing Penny's cheek while at the same time extending a gloved hand to Uncle Thomas.

Under its human cargo, the Talbot tended to groan a little, the weight of the three chattering ladies in the back seat however ensuring that the road springs, comfortably deflected, gave the impression of a freshly-graded carriage-way the whole distance to Lower Meliot Farm, where the octogenarian Gemima Capstock, physically frail but mentally as sharp as ever, remained presiding over the roasting oven.

'So, Catherine,' Thomas Coates was saying, 'you more or less grew up here on the farm — then you met Hugh and married — and now you two have a child — a lovely little thing she is — and you are living at ... Jensen's, is it? Yet this house is easily big enough for two families. What I don't understand is why you should have left the farm. You are my brother's daughter — my niece — are you not? Surely Harry must have left you provided for?'

'Another cup of tea, Uncle Thomas?' Rosa quickly interposed, for the additional purpose of diverting the man's enquiry. The question of Catherine's inheritance — or rather lack of it — was a sometimes frequent preoccupation in the minds of everyone who knew the girl. But as far as Rosa was aware, the subject had never been discussed before in Catherine's presence.

Rosa looked at Charlotte — helplessly. Charlotte was silent.

Thomas Coates was a sensitive man who had learned through the years to interpret silences which, he had found, more often than not, could be more communicative than many a text book. Although the relationship of this girl to his brother was a matter holding more than a hint of great intrigue for him, as he was to leave the following day and possibly never see these people again, Thomas decided to let the matter drop and listened with feigned interest as the conversation around him became bounded in the banal froth of such reunions. But Thomas Coates could not help recalling the startled expression he had happened to notice on the face of his nephew Tomos, when the subject of Catherine's lacking inheritance was recently high-lighted. There, indeed was a mystery.

And mystery Tomos may have been able to keep the subject, forever, had not Beryl Busby, Penny's mum, died that same afternoon.

'Mum's dead. You'd better come — and old Josh, too,' is how Robert Busby announced his mother's death, and stood to one side of the door, outside, where, those years passed, he had vowed never to enter the Coates house again while Catherine lived on Lower Meliot. He knew she was inside because he had seen the Brady buggy parked under the York gums.

'You'll have to wait, then,' Penny tearfully declared, closing the screen door on her brother. 'Uncle Josh is asleep.'

'Then wake up the silly old bugger.'

'Do it yourself if you're going to talk like that about Uncle Josh.'

'Are you coming, then? Or are you too bloody uppity to admit you're a Busby in front of that bastard bitch of a Catherine?' Robert called through the flywire screen door.

Penny had gone some way down the hall-way leading to the dining room when, on hearing Robert's remark, she turned and flew back to him in a fury. She threw open the screen door. Coming out of the dark house she caught her brother unawares. The flying door smashed into his face, striking his nose such a thwack that he involuntarily sprang back partly propelled by the force of the blow and fell flat on his back on the gravelled path. Almost instantly on his feet, he stood doubled over, holding his profusely-bleeding nose and emitting the most hideous curses.

Catherine was first to reach Penny's side and try to comfort her. Robert, on catching sight of Catherine seemed to go berserk, to stamp up and down, to shake his free fist at her, all the while clutching his nose bloodied by the door's inadvertent assault.

‘Too bloody good! Too bloody good to have the Busbys doing yer work for you! Throw us off, would you!’

Charlotte by now had joined the fracas and, not altogether clear as to circumstances, was nevertheless trying to calm matters.

‘I’ve no argument with you, Mrs Coates. It’s that ... that ... bitch there!’ he screamed, pointing at Catherine who secretly was enjoying herself, knowing that by her presence was agent provocateur. Catherine hated Robert Busby for his belittling of her, years ago. And she hated him still, she had just realized.

Robert Busby turned upon the young woman: ‘Don’t you smirk at me, bastard. I know you are a bastard. You’re sacred Harry Coates’s bastard that he’d never admit to — never to you, that is.’

Charlotte remained silent. The young man knew something she didn’t. Uncertainty robbed her of movement, of response, however much she thought she should help Catherine repulse her attacker.

‘What do you know?’ Catherine sneered.

‘You all think that Harry Coates was fuckin’ wonderful, don’t you? Well, sorry ladies. He was a bastard, too. Getting hold of this farm was his first bit a skullduggery. Making agreements with the enemy was next — Zangers, I mean. Then ... ‘

‘Oh! Don’t be silly, Robert. Harry had been dead for some time before I invited Mr Zanger to be my agent, if you remember.’ Charlotte was close to tears.

Almost unobserved, Thomas Coates had joined the haranguing group at the door. As a stranger without warrant in this fracas, there was little he could do except see that physical hurt was lessened by his presence. He placed a protective arm about Charlotte’s shoulders at which she, unconsciously, drew closely to him.

‘The silly bugger burns down his hay shed along with his d’

‘Don’t you dare say it, Robert Busby, don’t you dare!’ Thomas felt Charlotte stiffen, throw off his comforting arm. An iron doorstep was at her feet. She reached down, picked it up; pushed Penny aside and confronted the young man face to face: ‘Say what you had then in mind, Robert, and I shall kill you!’

Again, the young man sprang backwards out of range of Charlotte’s weapon, then terrier like, resumed his verbal attack on Catherine. ‘Did you know your mother’s still living, bastard? Go and ask her if you don’t believe me. I did — after I’d read those papers Harry gave to Uncle Josh to look after for him. Harry probably couldn’t bring himself to do

the business; but she most likely jumped him, anyway. She thinks he thought he had a wet dream. But it wasn't. Oh! No. You're his daughter, all right.'

'You're raving, Busby,' was all Catherine could manage. Emotion was beginning to take its toll. Only recently had she managed to substitute entirely the image of her husband for that of the man who was, who had been, the greatest love of her life. Hugh had been so understanding, so kind, so deserving of her love ... and yet ... Old wounds were re-opening, hurting again and before her was the man she most despised on all the earth. The animal fury born in her of raw frustration made her leap at her tormentor, to tear at him with her nails, to beat his head with her fists, screeching, weeping, flailing all together.

Busby was a powerful man, yet it was with the greatest difficulty that he overcame his attacker and managed to pinion her arms to her sides. He had not enough hands to subdue her speech however nor could he prevent Catherine from spitting in his face. Had not Thomas Coates at that point stepped into the rumpus, Catherine might well have used her teeth as her next weapon.

'Catherine!' Thomas shouted at her. 'Catherine!' he repeated. 'I loved Harry no less!' Somehow, he managed to relieve Busby and ended up holding the quietened, sobbing girl in his arms.

'Penny!' Charlotte cried, 'Get Hugh! He's with Tomos. They're checking the water in the ram paddock! Quick!'

Busby would not leave but quite recklessly continued his verbal attack on Catherine, even after her husband arrived on the scene and had relieved Uncle Thomas of his teary burden. Catherine now rested in his arms, her face pressed into him, her back to the ranting Busby.

'Ask him! Ask him!,' the latter screamed. 'Ask your little shadow boy!'

'Tomos!?' Charlotte exclaimed incredulously: 'Ask Tomos what?'

Busby, sensing a telling result to his latest shot, stood grinning, a sneering expression of triumph suffusing his bloodied features.

Tomos at this point attempted to slide into the background where he took up a position next to Auntie Gem and Uncle Josh. The elderly couple had been snoozing in the big leather padded chairs in the sitting room, serenely unaware of the drama developing at the entrance to the house. That minor cataclysm had now spread to the verandah which is where the pair rather dodderingly joined the melee as simply confused spectators.

‘Ask the Jew boy about that envelope,’ they heard Robert Busby throw at Charlotte, now recovered to a degree from her earlier bewilderment to challenge Busby’s attack on Catherine. ‘Ask Joel Zanger. He’ll tell you that he saw Uncle Josh hand it over to the sainted Tomos — and that he, Tomos, scuttled off with it without telling anybody.’

‘And this envelope: what did it contain? Perhaps it was something Uncle Josh was entrusting him to keep for him ...’

‘Oh! Sure enough. He was. I know what was in the envelope — and so does Tomos, don’t you, Tomos Coates?’

Charlotte looked enquiringly at her son, expecting his clarifying response. Tomos stood with eyes downcast; said nothing. The rest of the company, too, was silent; waited.

‘OK — then I’ll tell you. Like Tomos, I’ve had my reason for saying nothing — and Uncle Josh? Well, we all know Uncle Josh!’

‘Robert!’ Penny spoke sharply to her brother.

‘It’s all right, Pen,’ Busby assured her: ‘I’m not after old Josh. Like I said,’ he continued, ‘Tomos and me had our reasons for keeping the contents of that envelope quiet. Mine was easy: I just didn’t want that bitch getting any of it.’

‘What — or who — are you talking about, Robert?’ demanded Charlotte.

‘I’m talking about your husband’s bastard daughter, Mrs Coates — if you’ll excuse me. I’ve no argument with you, Mrs Coates. It’s her!’ Robert concluded with a sneer, indicating the young woman still clutched in the arms of her non-plussed husband, Hugh Brady.

‘Then if it’s something which concerns Catherine, Robert, you had better get on with it and say what it is. Otherwise, leave at once — and I’ll not take kindly to seeing you here ever again.’

‘I’m sorry to have upset you, Mrs Coates ...’ he began.

‘Robert!’

‘Very well. When Harry Coates lost his daughter in the fire, we all know he went a bit funny. Used to wander about a lot on his own. Came over to our place often. Didn’t talk much ... and when he did, it was only to our Uncle Josh. They seemed to have something — both of them being old miners might have been the reason for it. Anyway, you’ll remember it was the beginning of the autumn rains. The day the season broke, Harry was over seeing Uncle Josh. It was as cold as I’ve ever known it for April. Harry had come out without a coat or anything and wouldn’t take any help from anyone anyway. He just drove

off across the paddocks even though it was pouring and blowing like mad. We never saw him again. He died not long after.'

Robert's tone then changed. He began to laugh. Charlotte looked at him as she would were she to behold a mad dog. She was transfixed.

Before Charlotte could summon strength to make protest, Busby resumed. 'When I heard that Harry had left everything to you, Mrs Coates, my brother and me nearly split ourselves. The bastard had got nothing! Our days were made! That'd wipe the supercilious smirk off the bitch's face, we thought. Then one day, when you'd brought Uncle Josh over here, Pen, I decided to have a look around in old Josh's cottage. Among other things you'd best not know about, Pen, I found this big brown envelope ... and in it ... What was it, Tomos?' Busby taunted.

'Get on with it, Bob,' instructed Tomos.

'Ok ... I'll tell 'em. It was a will, Mrs Coates. Properly witnessed, too — by Mum and Uncle Josh. I'm sure Mum had never read the thing or knew what was in it. Old Josh's too silly half the time to know what he's doing. Pen can testify to that — him spending all his last cash on that bloody rattletrap of a car he gave you when you latched onto Tomos.'

'Anyway, by the terms of that last will of Harry's, Catherine Coates, his daughter, was to have half of everything: the farm, the stock and any cash he might leave. You, Mrs Coates, were to have the rest — am I right, Tomos?'

Speechless, Tomos could only stare, and nod affirmatively.

'So, bitch,' Busby concluded, dispirited now that he had fired his trump shot yet left his cause unresolved; 'move in,' he said with a sweep of his hand. 'But I'm warning you! We do a lot of shooting near our boundary fence. Keep away from it or we might mistake you for a dingo or something. You'd better come, Pen, when you are ready.'

In the silence thereafter, all listened to Busby's horse bearing him away in a stillness as portentous as those suspense-full moments between lightning flash and its successive thunder.

Slowly Catherine disengaged herself from Hugh Brady's support, her expression being that of one coming out of darkness into light. Uncertainty, faltering realization, disbelief, incredulity: no words could describe the sensations whirling about in her brain. What she felt at this moment was something quite unique, something related only to Catherine Brady, something dependent for understanding upon the life experiences, prior thinking and present capacity to process information possessed only by the girl Harry Coates had

nurtured alone in her early years: he, upon whose care and regard she had relied and grown until ... at the moment of her maturity she had been cast out of love to gather wisdom as best she could, alone.

Only Hugh Brady had any true inkling of Catherine's predicament. Had he not as another adult shared her company, enjoyed — and despaired — of her intimacies, her moods and mannerisms? Hugh Brady knew better than anyone else what drove the girl and thus was well aware that since the birth of their daughter, Catherine had made an immense effort to beat the overbearing disappointments of the past. The neglect of her, the absence of any mention of her in Harry's will, had been a frightfully heavy imposition for her to bear. This supposed rejection of her by the only man she had really ever loved — and Hugh included himself among the discards — had turned Catherine into some very strange paths. It had taken Hugh all his skill and patience to return her thinking to within "normal" acceptable limits. Always there was in his mind the lurking fear that his wife would revert to being the pitiable object she had turned out to be, upon their marriage. How would this so brutally imparted news of Robert Busby's affect her? Would all his hours, days, of undeviating effort, of laborious patience, be lost, wasted, to be gone through, endured, again and then once more subjected to the attrition of other, newer circumstances as yet unimagined?

'The document, Tomos. Do you have it?' asked Catherine, a flat-ness in her voice as she fought for self-control

Tomos shook his head.

'Is it true? Did it exist?' the girl persisted.

Tomos nodded affirmatively.

'How long, Tomos? How long have you kept this knowledge from me?' Catherine could contain her simmering emotion no longer. Her agony was visible to all.

Tomos shrugged his shoulders.

'Why, Tomos?' Catherine felt she had been betrayed twice over: Harry first ... now Tomos, of all people.

'The farm ... Ma ... Tamar. I thought while there was still a chance of Tamar being found alive, I'd keep other things uncomplicated. Besides, since you'd married, I thought you wouldn't want to get involved in the farm again ... '

'The farm? The farm? The farm without Harry is nothing to me!' Catherine was incredulous. 'I'm not talking about the farm!' she went on, a viciousness in her voice now.

‘You can have it! Have it, as far as I’m concerned!’ Then, softer: ‘It is knowing that Harry didn’t ignore me, Tomos! Knowing that I hadn’t been thrown away, that I wasn’t worthless to him! To know I had been remembered by ... by my father, Tomos! My father, too, Tomos! Don’t you see, Tomos? Don’t you see what you have done; what you would do to me? Don’t you care?’

2.

Just then, the Jensen’s new Ford chugged into the house yard bearing Sybil and young Clarke Jensen who, after lunch, had gone for a spin out to the lake to see the black swans. Both young people were full of high spirits, the cause of this vigorousness soon to be made apparent.

‘Clarke has asked me to marry him, Mother, and I have accepted,’ was how Sybil greeted her mother. Charlotte had hurried to the side verandah to intercept the returning couple with hopes of sparing her daughter another’s account of recent domestic developments.

Sybil’s response to Charlotte’s unspoken absolute bewilderment on hearing this news was calm. It was, after all, her own business whom she married. But she had not expected this. ‘Is something the matter, Charlotte?’

‘Yes ... No! It is wonderful news,’ Charlotte managed, receiving her daughter’s kiss on the cheek rather absently. ‘And Clarke ... welcome!’

‘Thank you, Mrs Coates. Will I get to call you ‘Charlotte’, too?’ Clarke Jensen asked with warm humour.

‘What? Yes! Of course!’

‘Mother! What is the matter?’

‘When you of all people call me ‘Mother’, Sibyl, I might ask you the same question. I’m fine. Come on in and tell the others your news, you two. Auntie Gem is sure to carve another notch on the mantel-piece over this one. She’ll probably make a hundred years old, now. You’ll have to catch Penny up when she comes back. She’s taking Uncle Josh home. When she returns will depend on how she gets on with the boys. She’ll have to be back for Harry, of course. I wouldn’t care to be in range when she’s speaking to Robert,’ Charlotte added speculatively to herself. ‘Oh! I almost forgot! How callous!’ she almost whispered: ‘Beryl Busby has passed away. You’ll give the news to your parents, Clarke?’

3.

Winter came and went. Tomos saw to the planting then announced that he thought he might go and try his luck in the Goldfields. His Uncle Thomas provided Tomos with a letter of introduction to his business partner there.

Thomas Coates said that after all he would take up Charlotte's invitation to stay as long as he wished at Lower Meliot Farm. At least, he said, he would stay until Tomos returned.

By the end of the year, Hugh Brady had received notice of his transfer to the metropolitan area. Catherine, again pregnant, was radiantly happy, Charlotte remarked. Joel Zanger was back on the farm, helping out; while Penny remained with young Harry, still happily attending to the chores around the farmyard and driving about in the Talbot.

But it was Arthur who did the real work of the farm: Arthur who had just turned up at the farmhouse one day. Arthur told Charlotte how Tamar had been so brave, that the boy had been thinking of his Mum at the last and of his girlfriend, saying how much he loved her just before he died.

'Tam knew he was a gonner. Mrs Coates. He was such a brave young fella. And no one could have asked for a better mate. Tam'd share his last terbacca with his friends any time.'

Arthur, too, got a bit teary at this point. 'Tam gave me these few things to bring home fer you if I got the chance.' the young man said. It was an act of mateship. Nobody would blame him for the lie, he felt sure. Arthur remembered only too well and believed he would never forget those last minutes of his friend's life spent in the trenches:

'Arty!' the boy screamed. 'Arty! Help me! O Christ, I'm hit! Me legs! Me beautiful legs! Arty!'

'Steady there, Tam. I'm here, Tam. Your legs are fine, Tam. Easy, boy!'

'You're a bloody liar, Arty. They're all messed up. I can't move the buggers!'

'It's just shock, Tam. Stretcher here, mates! Easy, Tam. Stretcher bearer! What's so fuckin' lovely about your beautiful legs, Tamar Coates?'

'Get down, yer bloody mug! There's snipers in the trees! Gordon! The mortar! Blow the shit out of 'em Gordon just as soon as you're ready. Take the bastards quick, before they do any more damage!'

'Righto, Sarge. Hang on a minute. Cop that one, Fritz!'

'Did ya get 'im, George?'

‘Did I? ‘is own missus if ‘e ‘ad one wouldn’t reccanize the bits, mate. Spread ‘im from ‘ere back to ‘is barracks.’

‘Arty! Arty, can’t you do anything? I still can’t feel me legs!’

‘Stretcher’s coming. Hang on there, Tam. They’ll soon have you safe and away.’

‘God, Arty! What am I going to tell Penny, Arty?’

‘How’d you mean?’

‘It’s not just my legs. I can’t feel anything down there.’

‘Coates! Trust you to be worrying about that. Loves you, doesn’t she?’

‘Eh? Yeah – I s’pose so. I suppose she does ... but Arty, we didn’t ever say that to each other. Penny and me ... well, we both must have thought it. God, Arty, why did I ever come to this... this...ahhh.’

‘Tam! Tam! Don’t go yet, Tam! Remember what you told me, Tam – about the farm and that and your wonderful Mum? Tam! Tam?... Jesus! ...Coates has gone, Sarge.’

‘That’s war, Arthur. Takes the cream. Leaves the scum.’

‘You’re a real friendly bastard, aren’t you.’

‘Sorry mate. I was talking through the hole in my head.’

‘Just watch out that you don’t cop another one, Sergeant.’

‘In that a threat, Corporal?’

‘Move, everyone! They’ll have our range in a minute!’

‘I was meaning you and me, Corporal,’ the sergeant throws back over his shoulder.

Private Tamar Coates of Lower Meliot farm in Western Australia, Arthur knows, lies buried beneath some French farmer’s paddock, interred there by courtesy of a German field gunner whose expert eye did find his range; whose next salvo blew the young lad’s dead body to pieces.

Charlotte had wept over Tamar’s last possessions: a few buttons from a military tunic, the watch that had been Harry’s and an acorn contained in a battered tobacco tin.

Arthur stayed on — probably because Charlotte asked him to — she didn’t remember. It didn’t matter. Arthur had been Tamar’s friend throughout her son’s military experience and she would not have wanted to let him go, anyway. Arthur, who was part-Aboriginal;

said his family name was Watson but wasn't sure if that was his mother's or his father's surname but more probably his grandfather's; thought it didn't really matter.

Two elderly people on a sunny spring day in silence regarded the long view before them. Fifteen miles to the east across the wide expanse of green and gold carpeted farmlands lay the line of low, blue-grey hills that marked the limit of their world. The air was warm, sweet almost and in it the sounds of bees and birds, while an occasional soft rustling of leaves high up in the dark glossy green canopy of the salmon gums added deft visual touches to the perfect afternoon.

Their buggy seat provided a wonderfully comfortable grandstand. Each remained still and silent, as though to speak, to raise an arm or cross a leg would break the spell which the scene before them imparted. It was the woman who spoke first.

'You'll stay with me, Thomas?' she asked, her eyes still fixed on the far-off line of hills.

'I can see no reason why I shouldn't, Charlotte. I have closed my school in Adelaide and I have no other ties. Since Belinda passed away in Plymouth, I have no reason to visit England and besides, I like it here. I find you, if I dare say so ... find your company ... comfortable, Charlotte.'

"'Comfortable'"? Is that meant as a compliment, Thomas? Just 'comfortable'? Nothing more than comfortable?" Charlotte queried with a chuckle.

'Only in the very best meaning of the word, Charlotte!'

'Of course. Of course. Shall we go?'

'Charlotte, I was planning a trip to New Zealand — a holiday. Will you consider coming with me?'

'Get along Daisy! I shall most certainly consider it, Thomas. Thank you. Now that would be comfortable!' the woman could have been heard to chortle above the jangle of the harness and the scrunching of the wheels.

'Penny, Joel and Arthur I'm sure will manage things very ably between them when we are away,' was how Thomas was advised of Charlotte's acceptance of his invitation. 'I must see Harrow and Laud though before then and fix up legal matters. I'm leaving Lower Meliot Farm to young Harry and to Catherine's Susannah. Penny — and Tomos, when his conscience allows him to return — will have the right to occupy and operate the property for as long as they want, of course.'

‘I think Harry would have been pleased with that arrangement. And if it’s money you are in need of, I have plenty. Ironically, five hundred pounds invested years ago with young Robert Shaddick, the mine owner’s son who found his own fortune in the Kalgoorlie gold mines, has grown into an astronomic amount — well, huge, anyway, by a one-time poor Cornish tin-miner’s son’s accounting.’

‘Aunty Gem! I have forgotten about her entirely! No, I’m sorry, Thomas. I couldn’t leave Aunty Gem at her time of life. I’m sorry.’

‘Then, my dear, I should find it comfortable to wait until Aunty Gem’s time of life allows us to go. May I?’

‘You are more than welcome, Mr Coates. And to think we could have travelled together as Mr and Mrs Coates quite legitimately. Shall we take tea, Mr Coates?’

Gemima Capstock disbelieved it at first, blamed her failing eyes and would have become more convinced as the meal progressed that there was indeed something of the child she remembered from so long ago about Charlotte’s behaviour, about her tone of voice ... had not the old lady told herself not to be so silly.

EXEGESIS
Towards the Light

Negotiating the Interconnections of Biography, Autobiography and Fiction:

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989, 2nd edn) defines biography as “The history of the lives of individual men ...”; also as “The written record of the life of an individual” or (closer perhaps to the text *Towards the Light*) as “The life-course of an individual...”. The *Macquarie Essential Dictionary* (1999, p.73) defines biography as being “... a written account of a person’s life; the study of the lives of individuals”. The definition of biographical writing I found closest to the model I had in mind when compiling my creative text *Towards the Light* was from the *Encyclopedia Britannica, Micropaedia* (1978):

Biographical literature, one of the oldest forms of literary expression, includes all those works in which a writer seeks to recreate the life either of himself or of another, utilizing all the available resources of memory and research. (vol. 2, p.28)

This explanation reflects my own attitude towards biography which is also that of the renowned biographer, Leon Edel. Edel’s view is that “...the biographer may be as imaginative as he pleases — the more imaginative the better — in the way he brings together his materials, but he must not imagine his materials” (in Hutch, 1997, p.70).

An example which epitomizes in some part this class of ‘imaginative biography,’ in my view, is *Chifley* by David Day, (2001). Ben Chifley, staunch upholder of the place of the ordinary man in society, became Prime Minister of Australia in 1945, following the death in office of his former leader, John Curtin. Biographer Day explains, in his introduction to the book, that Chifley left very little in the way of private correspondence. Further, though Chifley, a generally dour man, loved his wife Lizzie dearly, he relied upon the companionship of a second woman, Phyllis, a lady who devoted herself to Chifley as a surrogate Lizzie during his political career away from home. Of this important tripartite relationship in Chifley’s life there is very little record. Day ‘re-invents’ both Chifley the lover and Phyllis, his devoted friend, largely out of speculation and conjecture. What today ‘could have been’ becomes as good as ‘what was’ and, by means of this license Day is able to construct something of an interestingly paradoxical character for his man from bare

politically-inspired and public record. Out of reminiscences of Chifley's surviving contemporaries and from his own inventiveness, Day is able to soften the austerity, the doggedness and the iron-like loyalty of the man it is his task to portray. As a reader, I believe, Day's fictionalizing added to rather dry factual recount which facilitates the reconstructing of Chifley and makes the biography more generally readable.

One writer expresses the view that "...beneath any life-writer/reader's style of biography there is incipient autobiographical reverie about his or her subject" (Hutch, 1997, p.45). Writer Day's intervention in the life of his subject results in a treatment of the biographic genre that is in line with Hutch's commentary. Day does provide us with an instance of sufficient substance at least to establish that a degree of authorial supposition has contributed to the emergence of Ben Chifley the man, in his basically biographical text.

Biography, then, is the record of a life, which proceeds from incident to outcome, from mood to response, from vision to action as a series of not necessarily linear but always interactive causes and effects. My own narrative, because of the sparsity of usable researched material, is comprised almost entirely of oral records relating to my family during the period covered by my creative text. With my own knowledge and experiences added, in *Towards the Light* I have used this information and the conjunctions of fiction to fashion a narrative. Additionally, I did not wish that any *particular* person in my family should be represented in my work, except in part. The main characters created to inhabit this text are therefore composites. But remaining supportive of Edel's stipulation (above), my materials in respect of those principal characters are not always imagined, the truth of this claim being especially enhanced, I believe, if one looks at the text as containing a single, unitary *family* history, rather than the history of its parts. I suggest therefore that *Towards the Light*, might reasonably be regarded as biography, despite its being overtly fictionalized.

Caution, however, is signalled with regard to the use of the fictional element. Fiction can be "The branch of literature comprising works of imaginative narration ... something feigned, invented, or imagined; a made-up story" (*Macquarie Essential Dictionary*, 1999, p.288). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines fiction as "... feigning, invention; something feigned or imagined, invented statement; literature consisting of such narrative, esp. novels..." (1929, p.420). The esteemed *Encyclopedia Britannica* eschews the root term, though it does have an entry under *fiction, legal* — which is explained as: "... a rule

assuming as true something that is clearly false” (1978, *Micropaedia*, vol. 2, p.28). This focus does seem to rest well with earlier-cited quotations.

In short, in fictionalizing biography it would seem that Edel’s advice should be scrupulously followed, in that the imagining of materials must be avoided. The employment or application of materials within a biographic text in an *imaginative* way however would not seem to be a contradiction of Edel’s view.

All dictionary sources seem to suggest that an *autobiography* is the same thing as biography, except that, specifically, the writer’s life is his or her own subject. There is a case for suggesting that the line separating the two forms of expression is more blurred than is generally acknowledged as is exemplified in the Peal Press Dictionary’s definition of the term: “Autobiography: Biography or memoir of a person written by himself” (n.d., p.49).

In italics within my text another narrative runs parallel to that of the main text. This is a fictionalized *autobiography* that I have dubbed *The Narrator’s Tale* — fictionalized especially because the incidents in which it deals are so selected as to reflect only the briefest account of limited periods of my own life. As for a reason for this memoir’s presence in *Towards the Light* I can offer little excuse except that at first it seemed like a good idea towards ridding my manuscript cupboard of its over-crowding. Then, as the writing proceeded and the main text’s characters began to play out their allocated parts, I felt an urge to join them: not to simply sit on the shore and watch these swimmers in the stream of the narrative thrash about in the water. I wanted to actually get in there with them and make a splash myself.

The discourse which follows has been generated and, to some extent, fostered by my desire to add to fictionalized biography as a legitimate literary form. I work within the borders of certain language and literary theories. Periodically and, I hope, appropriately I draw support from these sources to illustrate and frame my discussion. In composing this strategy, I reveal my need to know that the genre is a legitimate means of memorializing not only one’s antecedents as I have done but I also attempt to show its usefulness as one way of casting up one’s forebears into the light of our times so that their actions, when thus illuminated, might be better understood. I hope that through the use of this approach, structured interconnections between past and present may be encouraged and that they subsequently might become firmly negotiated bonds. Narrative time in the fictionalized biography only loosely accords with that of real events.

Other aspects of the narrative that should be understood are those of the text's setting both spatially and temporally. It will be easily recognized that, following Chapter One of *Towards the Light*, the action takes place within the British Colony of the Swan River Settlement first, and later in the State of Western Australia. But because of the non-specific relationship of time between the movements of the 'real characters' and those of the narrative persons, an opportunity existed to throw onto the narrative stage some matters relating to the history of this State: matters that have had significance in the intellectual, psychological and sometimes physical development of my family members. In some sense, I have utilized recorded historical events and their causes to enhance their story.

Genesis and More ... (See appendix 1)

Towards the Light — at times biographical, at times autobiographical and basically fiction — is built out of anecdotes supplied to me as the result of direct questioning of my parents and relatives, and from my own memories of past experiences; from private 'on the ground' observations both in Western Australia and in Cornwall, England and, where factual information is lacking, a good deal of creative invention on my part.

In this text I have a strong interest in representing 'ordinary' people such as inhabit the mostly anonymous majority of any society, the name-less ones whose existence is often only inferred in official histories, such as the other forty-nine milliners and dressmakers besides Ann Haynes in Perth, for instance, to whom Tom Stannage refers in his *The People of Perth* (1979, p.114), or just a sample of the reported 8000 by which the Western Australian (white) population grew in the period 1870-1884 (Crowley, 1964, p.33). It is such men and women who, as they go about the vital business of their own survival, unwittingly provide a basis out of which the 'great' might be identified. The people who come and go and display themselves in *Towards the Light* are proposed as representative figures of the historically un-marked thousands of individuals who comprise the total population of any period in time.

It is only rarely that there is public recognition of the part ordinary people play in bringing about changes to and sustaining the society which we currently know as our own. These people are the ones who live next door to the great who are marked out as heroes. They are among the soldiers who fought alongside or at the command of those we consider to be outstanding. They are the other farmers, the fellow fitters and clerks and tram drivers who propped up the stages upon which those singled out for recognition strode. *Towards*

the Light is not an attempt to create a legend of an exceptional person. Instead I try to demonstrate how great ordinary people are given the circumstances and the adversities they meet with in their lives. In *Towards the Light*, fiction is utilized as a mode through which events are displayed and their effects explored. These events create the peaks and troughs and the variations of a story. Tin miners, tailors, farmers, restaurateurs, schoolteachers, postal workers, photograph salesmen, drunks, adulterers, lay preachers and financial adventurers are among the men and women appearing in my family who have contributed in some degree to the events of the narrative recorded in *Towards the Light*. Their contribution is only occasionally direct and not one of them appears in it as an exact replica of the figure I hold in memory. These people, as they were in the flesh, are like stage directors and actors' prompts: unseen, but without whose influence a performance would be very different to that received by the audience.

Harry Coates is predominantly all that remains in my knowledge and memory of my great-grandfather Sam, a man who at an early age was taken to work in a Cornish tin mine and who eventually migrated to South Australia with his wife and family. It may be that his family actually arrived later. In South Australia, Sam's daughter, Eliza Jane, married my grandfather, Albert, and together this pair had eight children. The couple, then with three sons and a daughter, moved to WA, along with Sam and his wife and their various other children. Sam and Albert left South Australia to try their hands as diggers on the Coolgardie goldfield. That this venture was not altogether a success is reflected in the known fact that Albert took up house-painting shortly after his arrival at Coolgardie. It was said that he gave the then newly-built (still-extant) Coolgardie Post Office's woodwork its first coat of paint.

Great-grandfather Sam, the Cornish tin-miner turned dairy farmer and orchardist was an influential figure in my childhood, though by the time I ventured on earth, Sam had long-since departed. Memories of his reckless drives down nearby Cotter's Hill and of the sure-footed-ness of his Nell, a rather diminutive black mare, were matters of local folklore and, for all I know, may be so still. At the age of ninety-three, I'm told, Sam died and, so the story goes, his Nell followed soon after, having died of a broken heart. My father would speak so fondly of his grandfather, citing the old fellow as an example worthy of our emulation, whenever our childhood tasks on the farm seemed to us unreasonably hard. Sam had begun work in the mines at age eight '... and it never did him any harm' Father would say and then in the next breath but one was just as likely to tell us again how frightened of

the dark old Sam was still, even in his final years. I personally didn't know this remarkable old ex-Cornishman, yet I felt his spirit imbue so much of my young life, that I wanted to memorialize him in some way. Harry Coates thus came to strut his moment in *Towards the Light* — a man much different to Sam in many ways. By the time Harry was constructed, his character and the lives of those involved in his existence was a composite of parts of many of us.

After leaving Coolgardie, Albert and Sam selected adjacent homestead blocks of 160 acres along the Blackwood River of Western Australia. Albert and Eliza then had four more children, one of whom was my father. My grandfather, once a butter-factory worker, became a farmer and remained in that occupation until his death. By the time I met Albert, he was an old man who wore a peaked-cap and a long, greyish beard. He was gruff, and short-tempered with children, liked the ladies — my mother, especially I was later told — and dabbled in radio. He drove a Buick such as few others could then afford and possessed a hobby farm at Gosnells. At the age of seventy-eight, Albert had the misfortune to collapse in the path of a bush-fire and died of burns some agony-filled weeks later. The double misfortune was that the fire which killed Albert was lit by his son Ron, my father, who was clearing land ready for cultivation.

My father was Albert's youngest son. His father's death in that shocking manner fuelled his already-existent complexes marvellously. Many years later, I learned that Father had suffered some irreparable psychological damage at age thirteen through being physically beaten in public — by none other than Albert. Ever after, and who better than myself to testify, Father's only true objective in life was to be liked. Regrettably for all concerned, including his children, he forever lacked a sense of moment or of appropriate behaviour, so eventually, he died in most miserable circumstances, very much alone.

For the purposes of *Towards the Light*, something of Albert also forms the character Tomos Coates, who in some ways resembles Albert's son: my father. Charlotte, Tomos's mother in the narrative, is modelled on my paternal grandmother Eliza. Nothing much was ever said in my presence about Eliza Jane. Father seemed to think of her as some sort of deity whose name, if mentioned directly, would bring down calamity upon the speaker. Uncle Syd, on my asking whose photo-portrait it was hanging in the homestead sitting room said, in a voice filled with awe, that it was his mother: 'the whitest woman on earth' and nothing more. This lady had to evolve as Charlotte if for no other reason than I might get to know more of her.

The Tamar of the novel is my uncle, Father's brother who was blown to pieces in the war in France. Penny is this boy's girlfriend who subsequently married his brother, Uncle Syd. Perhaps the most complex person in the novel is Catherine, who is a combination of several of us, none of whom were actually illegitimate by birth but who at times might just as well have been. The predominant influences embodied in the character 'Catherine' are those which affected my own maturing years. The reason I have chosen to represent myself as non-male no doubt has a deeper explanation than I here choose to hypothesize. I will, however, go as far as to admit that there was a similarity between the intensity of relief I felt as disclosed in the *Narrator's Tale* of Chapter Nineteen and that I wished Catherine to experience in Chapter Twenty-two, when she learns through Tomos's admission of the terms of the missing will that Harry had admitted her existence and thus had validated her relationship to him. But the overall question of gender diffusion and how I chose to represent my own input among the part-lives of my relatives is one that here must go unanswered.

Harry Coates and Charlotte Sommers, his wife, are my primary signifiers of theme although, as happens in reality, discrete catalytic moments do not occur. To be effective, characters need to be communally interactive, both with others and with their environments. Of the two, Harry, however, might be thought of as the least communicative. As a writer I know I found Harry to be devilishly ineffective, almost untouchable in some ways — and here, perhaps, there is more of my father on show. But taking into account the natures and behaviours of his originating figures, Harry's positions became plain enough. Harry, I remind myself, is a 'package' containing nuances of more than just one identity. As the text develops, I see in him elements of Grandfather and his father-in law, and later, my own father just as, inevitably perhaps, I see a little of myself.

As regards my manifest influence in the narrative, as evidenced in those extended autobiographical extracts rendered in *italic* type, rather than confine a total work to straight autobiography I have preferred to 'diffuse' aspects of myself throughout the major text, thereby avoiding that intense introspectivity which sometimes marks works dealing with the authorial self. Such avoidance is simply a matter of personal choice; a choice not intended to imply a criticism of autobiography as a whole, or as an aspersion cast on such works as Porter's *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*(1963). This, in my opinion, is a valuable book which contains much of great significance for the student of sociological developments of the period of which he writes.

Harry marries Charlotte, a woman like my Grandmother, imbued with the qualities necessary to complement the likes of Grandfather. Charlotte is loving, loyal, capable, possessed of that steely resolve of early country women to provide the support and inspiration their husbands and families relied upon as they battled — often selfishly — with nature and the constant economic pressures threatening rural survival.

The models of Harry's and Charlotte's children: Sophie, Sybil, Tomos and Tamar came from 'real life', as did Harry. Sophie was a mysterious female relative of mine whose life ended in a mental institution, the victim of a condition caused by some repressed childhood experience, they said. Sybil was the aunt who 'made good', became a nurse, married a rich man and lived happily ever after. My two sisters also appear in the characters of Sophie and Sybil Coates, the first who for various reasons made what she considered to be a series of wrong choices alienating her from her parents' love, the second, in her youthful years at least, with some success pursuing her "dream" of independence.

Uncle 'Tamar' was killed in WW1, and Uncle 'Tomos' did marry his elder brother's pregnant girlfriend. Thereafter represented as Tomos Coates is much of my father; someone who began his working life full of youthful enthusiasm but who, through a seemingly never ending series of wrong decisions, sentenced himself never to succeed at anything much.

Margaret Fox is an enigma but one not entirely without solution. Mother comes to mind; but that is another stream I will not consciously negotiate. As in the narrative, Margaret does however lead me to the illegitimate Catherine, Margaret's and Harry's daughter.

Juxtaposing *The Narrator's Tale* with some of the life of Harry Coates effected a degree of connection to the family line for me and afforded opportunities for reflection which I have found quite therapeutic. On the other hand, *The Narrator's Tale* displays similarities and alignments to a family history which have become disturbingly clear to me. My life-story's end may yet be that of another Harry Coates, though if it does, I feel I shall know for certain that biography and autobiography are inseparable twins: co-joined perpetual swimmers in the sea of fiction, a chimerical triumvirate of all recorded, recounted activity.

Lastly, an acknowledgment: I am aware that my family's Australian history evolved in another man's land and that only the right of a now-passed British Empire's might made this possible. The British invasion and subsequent disturbance of the Australian Aboriginal civilization is now largely historical, as it predominantly was even at the time in which

Towards the Light is set — so much so that I cannot accept any responsibility for it — any more than present day Italians might be held responsible for the decimation of the tribes of early Britons. Nevertheless, sympathies are a different matter and I view the moves of today aimed at creating one multicultural Australia as a worthwhile development including as they do such elements of restitution to indigenous Australians as can currently be accommodated.

Of all the characters appearing in *Towards the Light*, only one, whom I have re-christened Tamar (Coates), actually appears in present-day records such as the register of the War Cemetery at Villers-Bretonneux in France. He is my uncle, Horace Newton Cailles. Tamar's letters home also exist, they being the sad memorial to a "dinkum Aussie soldier" lad killed in the first enthusiastic few weeks of his 'smiting the Hun' in 1918. He was Private Cornelius Clive Russell, AIF, aged eighteen years, known in official army records as a "native" of Kangaroo Island, South Australia and late of Norseman, WA. His remains lie in the war cemetery at Etaples, France. The lad's letters appear to be typical of soldiers posted overseas and writing home to relatives in Australia. Cornelius or 'Son' as he commonly signed off, often wrote identical letters to his Dad and to his Mum, and he also wrote to his sister offering very much the same information as he had done to his individual parents. As far as I know, all three recipients lived in the same house in the gold-mining town of Norseman, WA. Because of the similarity of style between "Son's" letters and those of some (to me, unknown soldiers') displayed at the Army Museum of WA in East Fremantle, I have taken the liberty of using Private Russell's letters as representing those of Tamar Coates. The quotations from the letters that I have incorporated in the main narrative are verbatim except for the sender's and the receiver's name changes and the occasional insertion of the name of some other text-family member.

While obviously my primary motive for using the letters in the narrative is my desire to add some sort of verisimilitude to my text, I also enjoy the opportunity of celebrating the young WW1 soldier immensely. This is something more fitting and lasting, I think, than the few flowers we could find to lay beside the boy's commemorative cross in the Etaples War Cemetery.

My characters forming this fictionalized biography, *Towards the Light*, are English men and women who transplant themselves into the Swan River Settlement of West Australia. Their drive is a relatively simple preoccupation with the need to make a living that gives them adequate food and shelter, in an environment held to be hostile because it is

unfamiliar. These people inhabiting my text have no dreams of conquest, nor do they see themselves as pioneers or even colonists. It is not their purpose to dominate others. They may wish for social reform and dream of re-setting human relationships; but these people are no conscious frontiersmen or conquerors. They follow in the footsteps of the 'colonizers' more as a consequence of colonization that has made a space available for white expansionism. More adventitiously than by intent, these people are among the 'fill' which the rulers of the new-made British accommodation required in Western Australia to maintain imperialism's capitalist advance. These particular people do not concern themselves with the question of indigene dispossession. Their own right of presence in the colony has already been decided for them and is endorsed by the existent trappings of a familiar culture where authority such as they have been always accustomed to is underpinned by the British law and church they have known all their lives. They enter a new world and survive in it, without political aspiration and without interest in exercising their own authority anywhere other than perhaps within their immediate families. They are 'common' folk. When Harry Coates arrives in the Colony, a substantially European human environment has already been established. The subjugation of the indigenous people has been more or less completed and the rights of the Aboriginal population had been very much pushed aside.

Fremantle was not the destination planned for him when Harry left Plymouth in England. Though he made it to Australia, his journey fell short of his intended port of arrival. By misfortune, obdurate circumstances and bad luck, he was required to establish himself in Western Australia — or at the Swan River Settlement, as it was then more generally known.

Driven by economic imperatives too obviously powerful to resist in Cornwall, the examiner — reflecting my great-grandfather's loss of employment in the home mines at this point, due to a lack of demand for Cornish tin — is denied further access to his trade. Harry's chances of finding work in his own country thereafter were negligible, so when offered migration as a solution to his immediate dilemma, he accepted and headed for Australia. It was a country then held in general regard 'at home' in Britain; as exciting and as deserving as England seemed to have become in later years to the young men from Australia who then would stream back to its defence.

To a Cornish tin miner, Australia in 1874 was one of several destinations that were regarded as worthwhile. Canada, New Zealand, America, were all possibilities; but the

presence of tin then known to exist especially in South Australia (Moonta, for example) made that place a dream full of prospective hope for many. As is the case whenever one induces or suffers a radical change in location and lifestyle, as a consequence of his arrival in Australia there followed for this young man a period of orientation and re-establishment.

In Western Australia Harry is 'saved' and given a position by the sympathetic Cecil Fox, the produce merchant at Fremantle, in whose employ the young man remains for a long time. Only after twelve more years does he feel the urge to venture out again on his own, then taking his first deliberate steps again into the future — towards an outcome quite different to the one he had imagined would be his experience.

The narrative begins in 1874. Thereafter, time periods in *Towards the Light* are compressed to accommodate the exigencies of narrative structure, notably plot. Details of the players are to be found in the accompanying 'family tree' in Appendix 1. The 'real' people are listed on the right.; the 'composites' and who among the 'real' people have contributed component parts to their make-up are on the left.

Intertextual Interlude

As *Towards the Light* in one sense records the progress of some newcomers to this 'new' land, so it logs some details of their subsequent passage in life. It contains no inducement within it to contrast and compare with the outcomes of others' lives, either real or literary except perhaps for a brief, largely tacit reflection on the existences of some of the dispossessed Aboriginal population of Northam. There is some comment, mostly implied upon the exigencies of war; but remarks on that score supplied in the narrative are universal and not specifically Australian.

How long one takes to successfully adjust to such changes in lifestyle and society such as Harry encountered is largely a personal affair dependent as much as anything, on how readily one can adjust to newly-acquired or impressed values and attitudes, given one's limitations of strength and resilience. Harry's period of 'initiation' is twelve years. It was that long before he had the mind and the means to strike out on his own relying entirely upon his own newly- refined mental and physical resources. It was still a venture that was shaped for him by the past, however and thereafter it is his past that directs his every move. Like the majority of us, Harry goes forward reacting to circumstances. He becomes a farmer, marries and adds four more children to the one he fathered more or less

adventitiously. From a cultural point of view this latter child, Catherine, is illegitimate although this aspect of her existence will become a matter of consequence only much later.

In literary terms, Catherine thus placed, is the binarist ‘tensioner’ to be found in so much of literature, like the old man upon Sinbad’s back. To my mind Catherine could more fittingly belong in a Thomas Hardy novel — in the *Mayor of Casterbridge* perhaps. Harry’s life, for that matter, might be said to mirror Mayor Henchard’s in many ways, except that the major twist in Harry’s later life, though of his making, was not of his own design.

In creating my major text, *Towards the Light*, I have consciously followed no particular model, although at least in the first book, which ends with Harry Coates’ death, the format is common enough. Book Two deals with the aftermath following Harry’s death, when the principal spotlight of the text is extinguished and a character formerly shaded is now driven onto the stage to continue the performance. This second book is primarily for Charlotte.

Australian Settlement and Society

The accounts of Britain’s colonizing activity in Western Australia that I have referred to in compiling the following commentary of events, and the conditions bearing upon the lives of main characters in my text are drawn from the works of the historians Crowley (1960), Clarke (1973), and Kociumbas (1992). The works of Stannage (1971,1978,1981) have also provided me with a wealth of information of Western Australia’s colonial past.

This country’s white, free settlers came from many walks of life. Not all were poor, nor were all of them uneducated. A great many of these settlers, however, were ordinary working folk, escapees from the poverty and social confines imposed upon them by the English system of economic and class restraint. Readers of *Condition of the Working Classes in England* (Engels, 1844) and of such novels as *Mary Barton* (Gaskell, 1848) gain insights into the lives of the unprivileged classes in Europe of the nineteenth century and will understand the masses’ willingness to migrate to a new world. Most of the towns and cities of Britain were over-crowded, and unsanitary. Unemployment was rife and aggressive exploitation of the poorer classes throughout this capitalist economic system was endemic. Migration was an attractive proposition to those able to raise the fare to a ‘new world’ or to indenture themselves to their better-off, adventuring fortune-seeking employers setting out for new lands overseas.

Australia of the second half of the 19th century had grown out of the British Government's need to find an answer to the accommodation problems extant in its gaols. Its prisons were overflowing with offenders against the iniquitous social system that was sustained and protected by the then prevailing laws of Britain. So it was primarily as a penal colony, a prison, a dumping ground for criminals, that this country (as a British possession) began life. Social and legal reform in Britain towards the end of the 19th century saw the end of transportation, and Australia as we know it today began to take shape.

It is understandable in the case of Australia, as it was true of all European colonizations, that its new world status should be orchestrated by the very social class system from which many new arrivals in this land had sought to escape. European attitudes and values were imposed on and by the local immigrant society almost immediately after space had been secured for it. The opportunist, capitalistic acquisition and subsequent preservation of property in a seemingly boundless land became the priority and preoccupation of many. Aided by the white man's superior technology at the time — particularly, firearms — and a firm and sustaining then generally-held belief in the black man's comparative intellectual and cultural inferiority, the Europeans – invaders, no less — had little overall difficulty in transferring here the comforting customs, institutions and orders of society of their country of origin.

My narrative text, however, does not offer more than an oblique commentary on questions of the moral right to take and occupy Western Australia and to displace those who had made it their home for thousands of years. Yet I would make it clear that an understanding *does* exist in the writer's mind of the trauma imposed upon the blackman's society and culture by white settlement. Outcomes of colonization for Aborigines are well-recorded in or inferred from more than a hundred and fifty years of Western Australian documentation. In modern times the gaps in these documents have been filled by such works as those of Forrest & Sherwood (1995) and J.&W.Watt (2001) who provide comprehensive reading lists of works centred upon the subject of Aboriginal and European interactions. P.D. Milnes (2001) in his bibliography also gives us further material for study.

Most ordinary people who came here as free men and women were attracted by "... the chance to make a better life"(Crowley, 1960, p.6). This pursuit and the impetus directing it is not hard to understand. Even now, the "model" works and village of the avant-garde industrialist Robert Owen at Lanark in Scotland has an air of dread about it, despite the best

romanticizing efforts of its tourist-courting management. Show-place Morwellham Quay, on the Cornwall/Devon border, the scene of much mining and lime-burning, near the Tamar River, too, has its own message still, more than a hundred years after work there ceased. I also found the answer to my own question as to why so many Scotsmen migrated when the chance arose, in the course of twelve months spent living at my domicile, a third-floor Glasgow tenement flat, even though my accommodation had its own private toilet instead of the old days' three households to the one single convenience outside on the landing. Some tin miners of Devon and Cornwall with knowledge of the bleak moors of Bodmin and Dartmoor or the now-inert arsenic-ridden 'skimp-heaps' of Gunnislake and Metherell, near which I lived for another year, just west of the Tamar River, also may have looked upon Australia as the 'promised land'.

The establishment, foundation and progress of colonization in Western Australia proceeded quite differently from that of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. Western Australia as first conceived of in Britain was never intended to be a penal colony but was later, as de Garis puts it: "... swept into the change by a small number of pastoralists of the colony" (1981, p.322). According to Statham, it was just 22 of them (1981, p.209). For a period of eighteen years, 1850-1868, some of the persons convicted in British courts of justice and sentenced to transportation were sent to WA. This was at the behest of interests both public and private in this settlement as a remedy to assuage the severe lack of labour available to meet local needs.

An elite and influential local social class existed in Western Australia. This group was made up of grazier and pastoralist interests, exploitative timber merchants, whalers, and a few such as Charles Harper later of Guildford and sometime owner of *The West Australian* newspaper, who were harvesting shell, in the northern pearling industry. As much a pawn as a manager of these influential people was a British Crown-appointed Governor. Many of the Governor's dealings with the people of the Colony were with those whose business would be advanced by that association. While the Governor was, titularly at least, the spokesperson of British authority and his rulings were in the short term as good as law, all Governors at one time or another had their rulings overturned by instruction from home. (de Garis, 1981, p.303). But between the granting of an advantage and the interval preceding its contradiction, great immediate advances could be gained from a coerced vice-regal decision, due to the months of delay in communications between Western Australia and Britain prior to the establishment of a telegraphic link via Adelaide and Darwin, in

December, 1877.

In pre-Federation days, Western Australia, it could be argued, was barely of national importance. In this climate, less well-endowed free settlers without especial means were in conflict with the well-to-do who were able to ‘pick the eyes’ out of the list of opportunities available — especially so when it came to land allocations. It was not long before the usual ‘haves’ had more and the ‘have-nots’ began their customary fight for survival. Forty years later than settlement in the East, the Swan River Colony had been grudgingly established as a ‘dog-in-the-manger’ response to “... prevent any other European government from trespassing” (Crowley, 1964, p.9).

Although the French had sent two ships exploring the coasts of Australia in the first few years of the nineteenth century, and the Frenchman, Baudin, had landed briefly on Rottnest Island, they had made no territorial claims upon the land. The expedition of which Baudin was a part appears to have been the sum total of the extent of a French presence on the western coast at that time. As for the English, the western half of the continent was never seriously focussed upon except for quarrying its natural resource of timber.

In the early years of the Swan River colony with its scant white population, very little important literature was produced. The period has left us diaries and letters. Some of the sources of these documents, their contents and the society in which they were generated are discussed at length by John Hay (1981, pp. 599-635). The development of literacy was hindered in early Western Australia as much by economic imperatives as much as by the fact of a relatively sparse population being spread over widely separated areas of habitation. Besides, “The intentions of early editors were hardly literary: official notices, advertisements and miscellaneous information characterized their early publications of things of use” (Hay, 1981, p.603). This was at a time when Charles Harpur, for instance, was already in Eastern Australia working towards the emergence of a truly Australian literature. This must suggest that, in literary matters, a stage of separation from the traditions of the British past had begun; yet Australia-wide progress towards any change was but beginning.

When Harry Coates arrived in Fremantle in the late 1870’s he encountered a society already founded and formed on a foreign model: a legislative council of ‘representative’ government, constituted of 12 elected property-owners, 3 nominees of the Governor’s and three principal public officials and fully forged in respect of its essential premises on the fundamental values and trappings of the British, metropolitan centre (Crowley, 1960, p.54).

What Harry and other immigrants of the period found here was the stratified society of England echoed locally in general, and that opportunities to apply and increase wealth had been more freely extended to those arrivals who already possessed ‘means’. Land had been doled out to all comers by the British Government so many acres to the pound sterling’s worth of certain possessions brought to the colony (Crowley, 1960, p.6; Statham, 1981, p.182). This practice had been responsible for excluding the less-fortunate migrant classes from access to the soil. It produced a system of acquisition largely responsible for creating a ‘landed’ upper middle class in the European community. Who-ever came to Western Australia with nothing or very little in the way of capital had no option but to resume a place in society very much like that which they had left at home

By 1880, a virtual condition of total European conquest was already achieved.. The Aboriginal population was in decline. Latterly it was subjected to official segregation from the white community by the re-definition of the ‘Native Reserves’ provided for in Crown leases (Reynolds, 2000, p.211). These were overseen by Protectors of Aborigines — usually local serving police officers. An excellent account of a policeman’s relationship with Aboriginal communities can be found in G.J.C. McDonald, *Beyond Boundary Fences* (1996).

With the discovery of gold in the Kimberley region in 1885/6, the relatively few white pastoralists who had taken up huge areas of land in the north of the State on which to graze their sheep and cattle had found allies against the marauding blacks who were still resentful of the colonialists’ invasion of their prime hunting grounds in the region. Further insights into the prevailing attitudes — white and black — can be found in *Five Years in the Kimberley* (Lamond, 1971), while an account of the life of Walter Padbury (Cammillieri, 1971) is useful material for any student of local 19th-century history and of the attitudes prevailing in that era. The early history of the Bussells in *Cattle Chosen* (Shann, 1929) contains much of one family’s experiences while they come to terms with nature in what was to them this strange environment.

Harry Coates arrived on the Western Australian scene six years after the last British convict had landed here, on 10th January, 1868, as Crowley reports (1964, p.25). White settlement was going along slowly in the West. Farming, the establishment of the pastoral industry and pearling in the north, whaling in the south had all proceeded rather sedately. It was after 1885/6 when gold was discovered by prospectors Hall and Slattery (Nairn, 1978, p.59) at Halls Creek in the north that migration began to seriously swell the population.

Green notes this increase (1981, p.115), as does Appleyard (1981, p.216). It was at this time that Harry Coates decided to try his luck on the goldfields, a plan aborted by Fox's refusal to release him from his filial obligations to the child, Catherine, and by Harry's first serious brush with his conscience.

Concurrently, Harry then set himself the task of becoming an Australian, after his 12-year conditioning to the climate and the society of his fellow-settlers. The young man was fortunate in that he had acquired, through his employer's generosity, enough capital with which to set himself up. And since he had dwelt already so long in the country before making this move, he knew that he had a very narrow field of choice when it came to deciding on a career for himself. Yet, through the operation of the capitalist system which British colonialism had introduced and maintained, Harry was able to obtain access to the land and to regard it as legitimately his own.

Unlike Harry, who eventually was able to buy his land, Great-grandfather Sam and my grandfather Albert were able to "select" homestead blocks each of 160 acres. These blocks (about 65 hectares) of Crown land were granted subject to certain conditions, following the establishment in 1891 of responsible government in the Colony and subsequent promulgation of the requisite Land Act. Residency was the prime requirement the Government insisted upon before freehold ownership of the land would be awarded to the selector.

Homesteaders such as these two relatives of mine, often possessed very little ready money and needed to work away from their land in order to raise the capital for the improvements which would later result in their blocks returning a viable income. To Sam and Albert, the goldfields were an obvious and lucrative source of help and answered their own and their families' need of immediate sustenance.

The Liminal State

There is no doubt that at the time of Harry's first knowledge of it, this West Australian society to which he had to accommodate himself was colonialist and preserved by an exertion of a colonialist superior force. Yet this state of affairs would have been secondary in the new arrival's consciousness to the need of personal economic survival. Economic circumstances alone would compel him to recognize and defer to the rules of such a society, to obtain a degree of acceptance and to conform to the mores of its group

behaviours. Obtaining the status of a participative member in such a society would have been a protracted business, especially so when the limited, immediately available resources of the new settlement were already jealously held by the earlier arrivals. The position of the new migrant in such a community and for the many years in which he endured its uncertainty could be described as being 'liminal'.

The term 'liminal' or 'liminality' (from the Latin *limen*: threshold) was first used in anthropology by Arnold van Gennep (1908). A later anthropologist, Victor Turner, developed the scope of van Gennep's initial concept. The Scottish-born Turner, in a series of texts primarily describing the psychological and physical aspects of initiation ceremonies among Ndembu tribes-people of the African savanna, saw in liminality a means of classifying causality derived from his studies. Turner's interpretation of van Gennep's view of the 'liminal' state led him to apply the term to adolescent boys who had reached initiation age but had not yet undergone the ritual celebration that would entitle them to adult status within the tribe. These lads would be, in Turner's terms, in a state of nothingness — or liminality: neither one thing or another. They would be displaced from childhood yet debarred from the company and esteem of adult tribe members

In *The Rites of Passage*, the author posits a three-stage model of human behaviour to describe the transitional journeys a human progresses through in the passage from birth to death (van Gennep, 1908). These three stages specifically are dealt with more fully by van Gennep in his chapter on Territorial passage. The first of van Gennep's stages which marks any human movement away from one describable social classification to another is that of "separation" and is dubbed "preliminal". An example of separation may be a child's first day at school, but not referring so much to the actual physical separation from home/parent as to child's separation from the unrealized concept in its own mind of 'babyhood'.

In van Gennep's "preliminal" stage of transition, the subject finds him or herself cast adrift from the role to which he/she has become habituated. This liminal stage of transition is truly the "betwixt and between" condition of which Victor Turner (1967, p.97) speaks: a state of being "not one thing nor another".

van Gennep's second behavioural phase in the transition process is that which he calls the "liminal". Here, the infant of my example, above, is required to 'cross over' a threshold of reasoning and behaviour, to become aware of and to learn unfamiliar social processes and to begin to develop internal mechanisms to deal with them.

The third stage in this "rite of passage" is the "post-liminal": the "incorporation" stage

in which subject and society are reconciled: the posited child has ‘joined the ranks’ having learned the behavioural codes of society. The successful achievement of ritualistic enactments upon which he or she is focussed depends on acceptance: “The collectively patterned performance forms through which processes of cultural and sacred signification are integrated into consciousness and social practices” thus becoming the objects of desire, and “integration” is the result (Tomaselli, 1996, p.50).

Applying liminal theory to aspects of *Towards the Light*, the behaviour of Harry Coates in delaying for so long his attempt to integrate with colonial society can be seen as his transition period. He was prepared to put up with a twelve-year-long introduction to make his new world real before contemplating for himself an identity that accorded with the nature of the changed culture existing beyond the four walls of Fox’s business.

So too it was through seeking relief from the pressures and uncertainties of their separation from the old world in Western Australia that those early European settlers and profiteers so ably and adamantly, with observable ritualism, made their houses and public buildings in such a European style. They made narrow lanes and clusters of warren-like dwelling houses and re-created and aped a social order almost indistinguishable from that which they called “the Motherland”. Again of *Towards the Light*, one may ask: was it some liminal force that directed Rosa Compton’s refusing to entertain her one-time heart’s desire, on the grounds that as a dray-man Harry Coates was her social inferior? Was it fear of her imagined ‘separation’ which made her a victim of her own conditioning, even when the immediate imperative was to satisfy her natural instincts? And it might be reasonable to suggest that the yet-vestigial strength of any locally-inspired guidance based upon commonsense observation was no match for imported values and attitudes.

Turner appears to concur that “...society is ...” a “structure of positions”(1967, p.93). His belief is that liminality is something that arises and proliferates in the interstructural interstices of any social organization when changes in status of individuals or groups within a society are attempted. Liminality, according to this definition, might be likened to a pond into which the separated subjects must plunge. Some make it to the other side, some don’t; while others (like Harry Coates, immersed in the transition process defined as migration) seem to spend a life-time perpetually treading water.

Whether mature migrants settling in a new country reside forever after in a liminal state to some greater or lesser degree, is a question which relates to the ideas of Stephen Slemon (1995, pp.104 -110) when he comments on the ambivalence affecting the work of Second

World writers. Harry certainly found that his entombment, burial and rising from the dead propelled him into a state of betwixt and between-ness which was to be his condition for life.

Harry Coates is responding to the operation of the imperatives imposed upon society by the imperialist mind-set that his British social conditioning had embedded in him when he accepts it as an inevitability what his life's course would be after the mine accident in Cornwall. He feels that his future has already been mapped out for him by Shaddick's complicity with Butler in directing him to leave the country. Harry's cognition and acceptance of this imposition is serving as an unconscious behavioural model and is suddenly brought to consciousness when, at Fox's insistence, he abandons his plan to desert the child Catherine and her mother.

Such a statement seems to be a reasonable analysis of his condition when one recalls that Harry had those long years in which to process the details of his case. It would appear that even after so long a time, still there remained that class-instilled acceptance of a lot ascribed to him, despite the years of his distancing from his social origins.

Other characters of other stories of other writers respond easily in a critical sense to the van Gennep/Turner concepts of human behaviour and I include two examples by way of demonstration under the following heading:

Induced Liminality

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Jean Rhys, 1966) Rochester can be seen to deliberately induce in Antoinetta a state of "adrift-ness" achieving this through isolating her from him by calling her "Bertha". Antoinetta's anchorage is uprooted. She is set adrift, uncertain, unsure any more. Her identity is challenged. Thus she is prepared, as though for initiation. She is ready to enter into the detailed ceremony. And for this experience the image of her that exists in the reader's mind is transported into another belief-suspending scenario in which Antoinetta, transformed, enacts the part for which she has been devised. Her "aggregation" to use van Gennep's term takes the form of immolation. Is hers a symbolic death? Are we to accept the event of the fire as not only providing the light whereby the morals of the day in Jane's case are seen to be satisfied? Is the fire meant to represent a cleansing act; one which rids Rochester of the stigma and taint of the Creole and fits him again for English society In attempting to answer these questions, paths leading us far from the central

enquiry begin to resolve. The central concept to which I would constantly return, however, is the recurring induction of the liminal state that is demonstrated in the subject text.

In a tongue-in-cheek account of a teacher/parent interview, in *It's raining in Mango* (Astley, 1989) there is reflected the scholastic's understanding of authority's role in child preparation (or "separation") for adulthood. Brother Clement is the intellectual authoritarian elite of society at the time responsible for the initiation of its children.

Last year Will had run away from school and had been picked up by the police on the Sunlander somewhere between Townsville and Giru.

"Is he a troublemaker?" an annoyed Harry [foster father] had asked the head brother.

Brother Clement looked bland. "Far from it. A quiet boy. A studious boy. We thought perhaps there had been some trouble at home."

Brother Clement and Harry studied each other for a moment.

"He's not very keen on football, though," the brother continued. He was a large man who'd moved easily from the ruck to the mission field. A front-row man for God, he liked to describe himself modestly. Not afraid to tackle.

"Good God!" Harry had cried in mock horror. "Not keen on football!" He'd indulged in shaking motions of the head intended to express marvelling disbelief at such abnormality.

The head brother shrugged rugged shoulders and tried to like Harry Laffey.

'Of course he had a couple of nasty accidents last season as you know. First his collarbone and then a dislocated shoulder. Painful thing, that. However, those things didn't worry him at all. Nor should they any manly chap.'

"Naturally, naturally," Harry lied, remembering Clytie's [his wife's] distress. "Make a man of him."

"That's what we endeavour to do with all our boys, Mr Laffey," the head brother said with formidable virtue. "Make men out of them. Learning has its place, of course, but in the real world ..." He paused to allow his predicate of scrumdowns and last-minute goals in business mergers to suggest itself. (Astley, 1989, pp.121-123)

Of the young, those who were unfit or unwilling to conform and who therefore failed society's 'entrance exam' were in many ways ostracized either actively by rules of exclusion or through neglect. These people were the proverbial 'fringe-dwellers', largely discounted by society that, at the time of which Astley writes, may have been tribal in different ways than it might be seen to be today.

Notes on Language and Literature

In *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989) the authors discuss the work of two Canadian writers, Dennis Lee and Robert Kroetsch, exploring the question of how writers develop a language that might fill the silent spaces which the colonialist imagination encounters in a new land. Partly as a solution to this problematic, Lee proposes

...perhaps our job was not to fake a space of our own and write it up, but rather to find words for our spaceless-ness ... instead of pushing against the grain of an external, uncharged language, perhaps we should come to finally writing *with* that grain. (in Ashcroft et.al, pp. 142 -143)

The English language with all its nuances, inferences, connotations and significations; its history of long service and its capacity for emotive expression, is a remarkably adaptive tool that alone can be made a lifetime's study and interest. Its truly remarkable facility rests in it having the words and syntax to express the widest range of thought, thereby giving the mind an extremely broad field of conceptualizations. I am here endorsing the likely validity of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as discussed in Black (1962). Adapting language where necessary to changing circumstances occurs all the time. Writing "with the grain" as Lee puts it, will allow this natural evolutionary process to continue. Writing against the grain, trying to re-invent the language, will only impede and delay its development because the success of language rests on its facility to communicate.

Speaking personally, I have always found that the English of the moment expresses the Australian moment very ably. This facility perhaps was developed as a defensive support of my own realities in order to cope with my father and his on-going devotion to poets like Pope, Tennyson, Browning and Shelley and his periodic declamations from their works as he might rest from ring-barking a tree, crutching a fly-blown sheep, or stringing up a carcass. These would be intertwined with quotations between from Steele Rudd's *Dad and Dave* or even *Mabel* — not forgetting an occasional flung phrase from C.J.Dennis's *Ginger Mick*. Father taught me never to despise the English language for its scope and its versatility.

That the attitudes and values and the socio-economic and philosophic paraphernalia of England was uppermost in the minds of those settlers colonizing Australia is unremarkable. Yet the subsequent disintegration of the imperial centre in literature was to be expected, as the realization of a new place asserted itself. There followed naturally a focus upon those

inherited language figures, tropes and symbols which were patently inappropriate — some of which, starved of meaning or reference perished among the brilliant lights and shades of the Australian scene.

This disjunction, or alternatives in attitude and expression, of course does not occur at a given moment but is part of the continual process of development that language is constantly undergoing. Some old words become redundant or their meanings might be changed to cope with specific circumstances. New words appear to fill cognitive demands. ‘Specialist’ vocabularies within a general language appear. Word meanings change; new words are proposed and accepted all the time. The language used within a family often has units of unique reference, just as does the language of a community, a region, a state, a country. These unique or especial connotations are marks of identity and are mostly valued as such. On this basis, the discursive disjunction arising from semantic disharmony that shows itself when an environmentally non-specific literary canon is given prominence and is largely used to detail artistic expression in a location foreign to it can be readily apprehended.

Some meaning-modifications were and are demanded of the English language as it was and is used in Australia — a demand similarly called for by the European’s experience of Canada and New Zealand. In Australia’s case, this process of semantic modifications impressed itself gradually upon writers, rather than inducing abrupt changes to the English used by them.

Much has been written of the convicts and of life within the penal settlements which form the earliest focus of Australia’s establishment, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (Clarke, 1874) being among the most graphic. Along with this text there are other earlier writings which helped form a body of ‘Australian’ literature that included the work of authors such as the romantic Henry Kendall, the irritated evangelist of ‘Australian-ness’, Charles Harpur; the peripatetic Henry Kingsley; of the more patrician-like Paterson, along with the *Bulletin* short-story writers headed by Henry Lawson. Resistance to ‘old world’ attitudes and values became popular — as is amusingly revealed in some part if we read ‘Banjo’ Paterson’s *The Man from Snowy River* (Macartney, 1921) or Henry Lawson’s *Sweeney* (Wright, 1925).

The hub of any culture is popularly found in its artistic expression. And the nature of this expression very often grows out of conflicts and contradictions within the systems of its society. The works of painters such as McCubbin and Roberts speaking in colours and

forms reflecting the authentic Australian scene were extended in their own unique way by artists such as Nolan, Drysdale and the perhaps less famous Fred Williams. In their work they attempted to memorialize and communicate Australia to Australians and then to the world. Literary artists too articulated their rejection of imported thought and its embellishments and, consciously or otherwise, adopted an identifiable Australian form of expression.

Another Environment (Place)

Harry Coates's past, like Grandfather's, had provided him with many place-related points of reference which, in review, could have enabled him to enjoy the satisfaction that his progress in life and Australia entitled him to. From nothing, through patience and hard work in Fremantle, he had acquired more capital than any Cornish tin miner in several lifetimes could have ever hoped for. He had become literate, had learned to be a farmer, had married and was raising a fine family. Best of all, he was free of the crude life that had earlier oppressed him and in all probability still cursed his mine-bound associates in Cornwall. Yet the mine and its environs was the basis of his 'place' and like the migrants of his age and before him, such it ever would remain. That 'place' embodied the root substance of his thoughts. It provided a yardstick, a gauge, a comparator — and a reactive commentary — that influenced his every thought and was felt by him to induce or inhibit his every move. In *Towards the Light*, only the white generations who knew no place except Western Australia — those who were born here — would ever truly belong only to this land.

Yet, in visiting Devon and Cornwall in England, though strange it then seemed, I felt what I can only describe as an ancestral near-ness to that land, a close-ness extending beyond the simple touch of earth beneath my feet. At Lostwithiel in mid-Cornwall, the one-time home of my great-grandfather Sam, for example, there seemed to rise up from the earth a familiar air that was both welcoming and comforting. I felt a sense of belonging, of self-endorsement such as until that moment I was un-aware I lacked. It was as though I had come home: as though I imagine one might feel after a lifetime of discontented wandering, one could now rest, as after a job well done, one might lay down the tools of one's labours forever. And yet I was — and am — fervently, an Australian, second-generation. What had happened? Was this experience an actual manifestation of the sense of ambiguity said to

invade the lives of migrants world-wide? Or was it a self-conditioning, an induced preferred response within the environment of one's family origins, a coming together of (family) history in a place of haunting acquired memory — the details of which were and had been a part of me since my earliest years? From a literary point of view at least, here my experience demonstrated the condition of the Second World writer and his situation of "ambivalence" diagnosed by the theorist Stephen Slemon (1990).

With this experience behind me, I could more clearly understand why it was not unnatural that in making his farm here in Western Australia, my paternal grandfather's idea was to create as far as possible a new Europe. Quite naturally driven by that feeling of inbetween-ness theorists identify as pervading the migrant's mind Grandfather and thousands like him coming here from the 'old world' would attempt a resolution of that sense of strange-ness his presence engendered in this 'new land'. Did Grandfather, as did so many others, feel bound to create a validated image of himself here so that his move to the colonies would appear as a successful venture in terms of his former home's value-systems? Harry Coates in Fremantle sensed this separation from his homeland as an imposition of a rite of passage. But unlike my relatives, Harry tried his best to only look forward, not back, nor to hanker for his origins. Indeed, Harry's origins were the stuff of nightmares to him. His contentment may have derived from surviving in a new environment which he could know as some stage following on from initiation: an integration with this new reality. This is how I have attempted to portray the man. This attempted independence from his past, however is never complete and ultimately, brings on his downfall. In this respect Harry Coates differs from my Grandfather Albert.

In making his farm in the South-west, Grandfather cleared away the native jarrahs and red-gums from his land, burnt them on the ground and then surrounded his newly-planted orchard with imported pine trees. The whole as it became mature allowed him to play the squire over acreages held to be 'so picturesque, so English'. In so doing, Grandfather demonstrated again that 'place' was the refuge and anchorage that all people rely upon to give measure to their lives and to substantiate the meaning of both past and present. Grandfather was living proof of this. In terms of other developments physical and mental, his own and his family's endeavours and misfortunes distanced him from the past. But Grandfather held to his starting-point, which was always a place-related — perhaps held by that very magnet-like attraction to his place of origin which I myself experienced, long after

my great-grandfather was just a memory. Was it this recognition and acceptance of the past and its place in his recollection that made a successful man of him?

Yet, as I understand him, Alan Lawson (1983) is saying that people transported (in Australia's case, migrants willing or forced) and so separated from the familiar contexts of their former nurturing feel insecure in a new location. Their metaphysical needs depend on their physical adaptation to a new place. The 'new' place must become acceptable as 'home'. This involves the "transportee" in establishing a verisimilitude between life and literature, between 'image and experience', and an acceptable relationship between 'culture and context'. Here, Lawson suggests literature is directly affected by the sociological conditions affecting its production, entry and reception. Australian and Canadian historians assuming that it was part of the writer's task to foster "a sense of national identity" (1983, p.168) have grown upon very similar original foundations.

The main characters of *Towards the Light*, however, are making the physical and psychological move out of one world into another. They vary in their rate of adaptation and change. Harry, of necessity, abandons the troglodyte world he knew as normal and learns to cope with and exploit a surface existence — for which he ultimately pays a terrible price. Charlotte endures several tragic experiences yet survives the experience more or less intact. Gemima Capstock, elderly when she arrives in Australia, it might be argued is the most successful of all in that she never changes nor is her new environment a conscious factor in her existence. Gemima Capstock is the sort of person whose life is predominantly bounded and affected by the present physical view available to her. Her only departure into conjectural time in Western Australia is when she takes Rosa to lunch at the *Palace* and later, when she decides that the remainder of what life is left to her will be devoted to the care of Charlotte and her family. Her one full attempt at introspection (when in Chapter Five she and Rosa are at the beach) is cut short by the rising storm. Gemima only once more, much later, again re-visits her English past.

In the process of considering 'place' as this may have affected Harry Coates, my attention was drawn to Xavier Herbert's autobiography, *Disturbing Element* (1963). This account of the writer's life experiences begins in those post-gold-rush years in Western Australia and highlights, for a large part, notable moments of his life as he grows up in a sparsely populated, barely urbanized community largely consisting of people who, perhaps through disinclination, unsuitability or lack of opportunity, are unable to experience lives of satisfaction. Herbert demonstrates the difficulty that ambition imposed upon a sensitive

person living in such a society as existed in Fremantle in the early 20th century. When, after leaving school at age fourteen, he recounts details of his first employment, I recognized from personal experience that Herbert's story held a true-enough reflection of the social conditions and attitudes which prevailed in metropolitan Western Australia when I was growing up. Still very much unchanged until years after World War 2, Herbert's youth — and mine — were lived in and around a city where the evidence of its pioneer days was yet apparent.

In Perth, there were still some very ordinary private dwellings situated on St George's Terrace. Adelaide Terrace was a prime private residential area, as was tree-lined King's Park Road in West Perth. Subiaco was lower middle-class. Shenton Park was for blue-collar workers; and whoever came from Fremantle was thought of disparagingly by many as being anarchist, Irish Catholic or Communist, and so dismissed as belonging to another world. The Metropolitan area that I knew as a child still bore signs of the greatest gold-rushes known in this country and of the wealth it generated locally, besides showing effects of a world war and those of a huge economic Depression. The second World War was in progress. There was small opportunity for the realization of private ambition.

How much less invigorating would Harry Coates's life have been in and around the tiny port city in the years 1874 -1886? The parochialism of those days can only be imagined. Farming communities isolated by distance and dependent upon the irregular services of people like 'Grizzly' Cullen, the general carrier, to keep one person in touch with another, lived under even more difficult social conditions and tended to be under-developed in many ways.

Early European settlers in this country were slow to realize or admit its differences and seemed blind to its distinctiveness. Until space was made in what was termed 'this new land' for a general intellectual appraisal of the land to be made for what it was, Australia seemed forever the 'harsh', 'hot', 'arid', 'isolated', 'lonely' place. Then, as was the case in my childhood, Western Australia was the down side of a comparison with Europe and was the antithesis of England.

The spaciousness of Western Australia did not noticeably impress itself upon Harry's mind. Of greater importance to him was the security afforded him through his association with Cecil Fox. Unrealized by Harry, Fox might have represented the 'hearth-place' of the Cornishman's childhood, a private place such as we all cherish, where another less-threatening reality resides and one to which we can all return from time to time. In many

ways Harry, in this aspect was modelled on my father whose mindset was such that it made him indifferent to the physical place beyond the potential of its immediate effect. Such place and space and what it contained meant to Harry no more than these things mean to a child: simple pleasure or simple pain.

Harry's straight-forward reason for naming his farm "Lower Meliot" is explained in the creative text. Grandfather Albert named his farm, *Blakiston*, after the location in South Australia that had so impressed him as a young man and had been the place where he had made a number of life-changing decisions. The name *Blakiston* aroused in the old man's eye, so my father would say, something quite mystical; quite incommunicable. My father's farm was named for friends to whom my mother had become devoted some years earlier, not because of her love of an actual piece of land; but because of the brave spirits occupying it. They were two unlikely farmers: an elderly spinster primary-school teacher and an ex-train driver who had earlier lost both legs in an accident. I myself named the property which I briefly managed after a north-west billabong that at the time I remembered with affection and where, I liked to think, I had spent time communing with my inner self and making life-changing decisions.

In Australia, Coates attempted to make this his 'place': Harry's 'thinking spot' (Chapter Fifteen) was the nearest he ever came to a spiritual relationship with the earth. Like the members of the family from whom this character was constituted, the land was best known for what it might yield in terms of physical return. For this man it had little or no confessed metaphysical value. Harry therefore barely acknowledges the place to which circumstances have led him. What at first may have seemed strange came to be tagged with the familiar, with substantiation, imbuing place with a sense of continuity, perhaps. The 'logic of association' maybe did *not* break down. Place-name associations would have served for Harry Coates what might be called a 'consolatory' purpose of locating, the newcomer within this changed environment; of making the stranger less afraid of the difference.

Yet naming place, as Carter (1987, p.405) implies, is a practical necessity and naming one place after another for whatever features they share is understandable, as is the naming of one place after another for the psychological comfort the naming provides, or the emotional significance brought to the mind of the namer by time, condition, location or scene.

"Guildford", "Ellenbrook" and "Woodbridge" in Western Australia provide us with some most apt examples, as recorded by Lukis (in Fox, 1999)

In March, 1827, when Captain James Stirling in command of H.M.S. Success explored the Swan River, he led a small party of his crew up the Swan River to its junction with a stream which he named Ellens Brook in honour of his wife, formerly Ellen Mangles. He was impressed by the country he saw on the upper reaches of the Swan and thought it resembled the area around the home of his wife's family at Woodbridge, near Guildford, in Surrey, where he first met and courted Ellen. On his return (to WA) in charge of the expedition to found the colony ... he took up ... 4000 acres between the Swan and Helena rivers adjoining the townsite which he named Guildford. This property ... he called Woodbridge.(?1978, p.3)

Apprised of this knowledge and made aware that Stirling and his very young wife had been separated for upwards of a year at this point does tend to infuse the associative naming of Guildford and its environs with an excusable romanticism. Carter comments: "It was the names themselves that brought history into being, that invented the spatial and conceptual coordinates within which history could occur"(1987, p.405). Carter cites several examples, such as *Cape Catastrophe*, *Mt Misery* and *Retreat Well*, which perhaps reflect more directly the experience of the traveller and the explorer in unfamiliar space.

Resistance

Resistance in Second World literature, as Stephen Slemon says, is "...at root a reading position." (1990, p.190) *Towards the Light* can be as easily explored with anti-colonialist sentiments as well as with a colonialist interpretation. From a theoretical standpoint the text is multi-faceted. Again as Slemon says of all Second World writing, this writing is "ambivalent", floating between its primary inspiration, the literature of the First World and that of its combined binaristic opposite Third and Fourth Worlds.

Firstly, *Towards the Light* concerns itself with simple people: people without pretensions towards domination of others; individuals who strive to survive without attempting to make changes to anything more than their own condition. In the schema of First World literary figures, these people might be characters taken from an elucidatory chorus such as Thomas Hardy was fond of creating and which appear in his novels *Far from the Madding Crowd* or *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. They enact their allotted roles very much within what would be the expectation of those responsible for organizing their society. People like Harry Coates, Charlotte Sommers, Fox the produce merchant and

Gemima Capstock accept and use the prevailing social and economic condition without seriously questioning its motives. Through their actions or their histories they may at times lay bare for comment particulars of their society's mores which some might hold to be worthy of an evangelist's attention the permission given by society to people like Butler, Cecil Fox — even Harry — to obliterate 'difficult' human beings from their orbits.

. Following Harry's death, the context of *Towards the Light* moves closer to the rural Western Australia of the present day. The narrative deals with events that more perceptibly deal with the first and second Australian-born generations of European descent. Tamar Coates goes to war. Australia's allegiance to Britain, though beginning to be questioned, is still an underlying tenet of Australia's unwritten social charter. The boy's letters begin to demonstrate a change in point of view that is representative of wider 'Australian' society. His letters express excitement in the prospect of the adventure of overseas travel; of ship-board life, and sharing the company of hundreds of like-minded young men impelled by exhortations of paternalistic national propaganda campaigns, Tamar at first sees himself as being on a mission to save the 'mother' country. After months of camp life in England, the boy is disillusioned, "sick of this bloomin' war", and sends home word of his satisfaction that the vote for conscription in Australia was "No".

Yet in contrast, in a letter home to *his* mother from another soldier from his posting in Palestine, Fred Carthew had this to say in January, 1918:

Well the troops are very much disgusted about the defeat of Conscription, we are quite sure that Aust. would be put through under those conditions, but it looks as though she is turning her own soldiers down.

Well I think that is how a good many of the chaps feel about it. Especially the old hands. (in N. Carthew, 2002, p.138)

Nationally and politically, it may well have been as frightening a time as life without Harry may have been for Charlotte. Ambivalences at personal and national level were rife: young men were being killed in foreign lands, young women at home were being left without mates, and individuals, such as Charlotte Coates were being forced by circumstances into roles for which they had never been prepared. World War 1, then World War 2, changed nations, societies and individuals and every activity that nations, communities and individuals involve themselves in. Everywhere there was a duality of motive, of inspiration and attack. There was extraordinary change, and there was its natural corollary, resistance to change. Of the many forms resistance can take, that which might be

appropriately introduced here is resistance which finds its expression in art and in particular in writing. Says Stephen Slemon:

Literary resistance ... can be seen as a contractual understanding between text and reader, one which is embedded in an experiential dimension and buttressed by political and cultural aesthetic at work in culture. And resistance literature, in this definition can thus be seen as that category of literary writing which emerges as an integral part of an organized struggle or resistance for national liberation. (1990, p.107)

National liberation is not a conscious theme of *Towards the Light*, yet the spirit of liberation may be seen to inhabit the character of Catherine most clearly. Of all the subjects in *Towards the Light* upon whom the spotlight of investigation might fall in this quest, she is the one most likely to be of interest. Read as a metaphor, Catherine can be seen to represent the evolving Australian. From an 'illegitimate' beginning as an off-shoot of the invading race, in terms of her right of occupancy, Catherine endures. She endures apparent disowning; she endures, copes with and, with her husband's help ultimately overcomes the influence of Harry's seeming abandonment of her, emotionally. Catherine finally achieves independence for herself and begins to live a life relieved of her of the burdens of the past, securely holding onto the recognition she finally obtains through Tomos's confession.

Catherine, in this sense is an exhortation for the nation to dispense with the obfuscating stances and attitudes of its past and to enthusiastically take up its present. She is not only a figure of resistance: she is a bold statement of determined independence and this declaration of self is nowhere more evident than in her statements in the final chapter of *Towards the Light*. Harry of course stands for the past, a seminal figure, an initiator of values without whose acknowledgement the present cannot be understood. (The second line of the following extract could explain my choice of title for this work:

Slowly Catherine disengaged herself from Hugh Brady's support, her expression being of one coming out of darkness into light. Uncertainty, faltering realization, disbelief, incredulity: no words could describe the sensations whirling about in her brain. What she felt at this moment was something quite unique, something related only to Catherine Brady, something dependent for understanding upon the life experiences, prior thinking and present capacity to process information of the girl Harry Coates had nurtured alone in her early years; he, upon whose care and regard she had relied and grown until ...

‘The farm? The farm? The farm without Harry is nothing to me!’ Catherine was incredulous. ‘I’m not talking about the farm!’ she went on, a viciousness in her voice now. ‘You can have it! Have it, as far as I’m concerned!’ Then softer: ‘It is knowing that Harry hadn’t ignored me, Tomos! Knowing that I hadn’t been thrown away, that I wasn’t worthless to him! To know I had been remembered by ... by my father, Tomos! My father, too, Tomos! Don’t you see, Tomos? Don’t you see what you have done; what you would do to me? Don’t you care?’ (pp. 208 - 210)

Undoubtedly in Stephen Slemon’s use of the term, resistance as a marker of the Second-world writer can be expressed in many ways both overt and embedded in the actual text, either as an outcome of deliberate authorial intent or as a result of reader participation/reconstruction in and of the work. Slemon’s warning that literary resistance occupies a largely “un-theorized” position in the field of post-colonialist thinking does seem to imply that much more work needs to be done before his proposal of the continuing ambivalence of the second-world subject becomes accepted as an inherent feature within post-colonial pedagogy.

Matters of Gender

Feminists of today may find it lamentable but still it is a fact that the nineteenth- and early twentieth- century womenfolk in my family, with but one exception, supported their men, operated within the narrowed confines that society had allotted to ordinary women, and performed what are now sometimes thought of as the twin drudgeries of home-making and child-bearing with apparent pride and dignity. In *Towards the Light* I have tried to keep the women in the forefront of the action They gave their support to their menfolk: and jointly with their partners made all progress possible. In the absence of their mates they continued to maintain the fabric of family life. Charlotte Coates (Margaret Fox is her antithesis) is a personification of those women within my family who collectively laboured to fill the role of devoted wife and mother so ably without serious complaint or obvious sense of personal debasement.

In drawing Charlotte, and indeed in creating all the women of *Towards the Light*, I wished to explore something of the feminine roles within my family. Women had figured equally with men in my world, of course, but differently. An historical review of the relative positions of these women among my family’s menfolk seemed to be a reasonable starting point.

Australia, or in this case more pertinently, Western Australia in the 1890's progressed in those fields of human endeavour then held by its white population to be most necessary and laudable. The measurable aspects of this progression proceeded at the hands of man, not woman. There was land to be cleared, railways to be laid, timber to be cut, cattle to be driven and streets to be paved, houses to be built, public edifices to be raised, horses to be broken, grain and other commodities to be lumped, bricks to be made and concrete to be mixed, and sheep to be shorn. In those days, muscle was king. Tied to the business of carving a home and then a nation out of the wilderness was, in those initial stages, man's work.

Complicating the effectiveness and direction of all this activity was a shortage of investment capital: "... the cost of maintaining civilization where the profit margins were already low ..." (Kingston, 1982, p.245) did not create much investor interest. Engaged by the preoccupations caused through this lack of funds and the determination of many to build up in this land replications of their original culture, there was no room for radicalism, for disturbing and re-setting the foundations of their culture to cope with such innovative ideas as gender equality. Besides, society then was hedged in by the norm of patriarchy. Though there may have been a woman on the throne of England, they were men who ruled through the parliament there and through the executive council here. Men administered the law and finances of the Settlement, controlled its trade, doctored the population — but the role of women is only recently becoming acknowledged. My characters: Charlotte, Sybil Coates, Gemima Capstock, Rosa Compton Margaret and Agnes Fox were created to live within and because of this understanding of the historical scene and perhaps to stand as metonymical representatives of all women with the great individual public figures such as Caroline Chisholm, Grace Bussell, Mary McKillop and Louisa Lawson.

In *Towards the Light* there is a subsidiary purpose, to reflect a faithful representation of many *social* attitudes prevailing in those early times. An understanding of the status of women and the preponderance of that patriarchal domination in matters of a territorial, economic and political nature to which I refer is evident from much of the action. Rosa Compton's diffidence leading her to accept spinsterhood rather than pursue her self-determination with the inhibited Cornishman, and her acceptance of the Reverend Samuels as her less-preferred mate fulfills society's expectation of her; Margaret Fox's acquiescence in going with Harry to the farm follows Fox's disposal of her as he might any other chattel; Charlotte's confrontational pursuit of Harry and her startling declaration of her intention to

live with him at any cost; Johnson's economic and mental collapse following the wife-stealing itinerant worker's under-mining of his self-image; the inconsequential discard of Miriam Johnson: these are all episodes that present a gender-based commentary. Gemima Capstock may suggest something of an anomaly in respect of the foregoing. However, she might be taken to be the 'exception which proves the rule'. Gemima's economic self-sufficiency and asexual emotional ties gave her life emphases and freedoms that younger, less-independently minded women were unable or unwilling to enjoy.

Charlotte Coates was drawn, very much in the image of my grandmother. This lady dutifully married, had all the children her husband wanted, cared for them as best she could and managed herself, her family and the selection (embryonic farm) single-handedly. Grandfather was often away working to raise the capital to develop his block of land. Grandmother rarely moved out of the district till the day she died.

World War 1 allowed society a possibility of change; but for most people, the economic depression of the 'thirties placed a check on possible aspirations.. However, the young women of *Towards the Light*: Sybil Coates and Penny Busby show signs of a mobility that would shortly confuse and challenge the long-held masculinist worldly views. Catherine, perhaps due to the manner of her upbringing was atypical: an age ahead of her time in some respects; whereas Charlotte's adaptability would serve her in good stead in her remaining years.

In creating my text I have borne in mind what was reported to me and what I observed to be fact, in the same way as facts occur in *Monkey Grip* (Garner, 1977) I read this book alongside of Austen's *Emma* (1816). The experience left me forever open-minded in matters of gender representation. *Monkey Grip*, for me, was a book of 'honesties', a book which in its comments on all levels accorded with my own observations of life and people's reactions to the business of living. *Emma*, too, I adjudged to contain the life recipes necessary for survival within the times and the place in which the story was set. Susan Sheridan (1995, p.122) also notes the appropriateness of time and place, perhaps unwillingly, when she speaks of Miles Franklin allowing "her characters to refer casually to 'black gins' as caricatures of everything a respectable white woman is not". Franklin's construction of the Aboriginal woman was one of many honestly-held beliefs among some levels of the white society of the time. Those times are increasingly difficult to admit to; as incongruous as to think of Jane Austen's Emma pissing on the grass, as Helen Garner's twentieth century heroine so enjoyed doing.

In the 1880's, women in this State were not franchised members of the community, the right to vote being extended to women only in 1899. That here was a patriarchal society is undeniable. Only women of an independent nature, unfettered by emotional ties and possessed of adequate private means and capacity could fully participate in such a society. Gemima Capstock in *Towards the Light* was such a one. A 'real' woman who, in some respects, was of a similar mould to Gemima's was Catherine Gavin. According to Rica Erickson (1969), she capably managed both family and farming enterprises with admirable efficiency. The spirit of this lady, as well as of a sister of my mother's and a sister of my father's, in part appears in Gemima. These 'family' women were so 'different' to me as a child that I dared not get to know them. By the time I had grown braver, they both had left — permanently.

Country women: wives, the un-married female relatives, adult daughters, widows — perhaps by today's standards would have endured their small lives in conditions which they countered, discounted or accepted according to their inclination and abilities. Seemingly repetitious 'recreational' activities such as embroidery, knitting, lace-making sometimes, and manufacturing improvised works of both utility and art out of whatever materials that came to hand comprised one set of reliefs which were popular. (Country museum shops, of the type at Hyden in West Australia's south-eastern agricultural area, often display some of the sort of material I refer to.)

Interludes in the life of Charlotte Coates, such as the disappearance and subsequent death of her father; the apparent marriage of her beloved Harry to Margaret; her probable elation when she had the news of Margaret's removal from the scene; the days and months of anguish when Harry was compelled to be absent from her side; her fear of long nights alone with her children, when the sigh of a gum tree caressed by the wind grew fantastical in the moon-less darkness (as I know gum trees in lonely places can) and Charlotte wept into her pillow are not reported in my creative text; but their possibility exists and the reader's empathy can supplement the narrative account.

Experiences such as Charlotte's were commonplace among country women,. Given the position of women in the society at the time and the nature of theirs and their menfolk's undertakings, much sadness and hardship was endured without remark. Histories tend to emphasize victories and their effects and to deal with spectacular disasters as stimulants to the progress of laudable endeavours. The relentless attritional despair bred of ever-disappointed hopes that drive some to one form of madness or another goes mostly

unreported — if indeed it is reportable.

Although the women of *Towards the Light* conform to my thesis that characters appearing in the text are composite figures compounded out of real people, the girl Catherine, as I have earlier explained in that section of this exegesis entitled *Resistance*, is very much (also) a metaphorical figure. Essentially Catherine was constructed simply to advance the story-telling. She is a structural figure who sulks when the emphasis of the plot sidelines her, who endorses Harry's movements along the story-line, who holds the tale together when the 'hero' departs for good and lastly provides a denouement which facilitates a reasonable conclusion. Then, as the character evolved, I recognized that aspects of her behaviour were reminiscent of my own experiences and responses.

The question of her 'belonging' in a familial sense reflects this strength of my own experience. Once, as a six-year old being extricated and carried away from the wreckage of my father's truck that for some inexplicable reason he had driven into the path of an accelerating diesel railcar, I had heard the words "My son! My son!" uttered over me, just before my memory failed temporarily. Other than that, my fathering could well have been a source of dubiety. How I longed to hear those words repeated — under less fraught circumstances, of course. But this was not to be. Catherine's adult anxiety and preoccupation with her fathering, therefore, is something I can easily understand and relate to. It would seem that among the many presences I have drawn into the characters of *Towards the Light*, there I am too, matters of gender regardless.

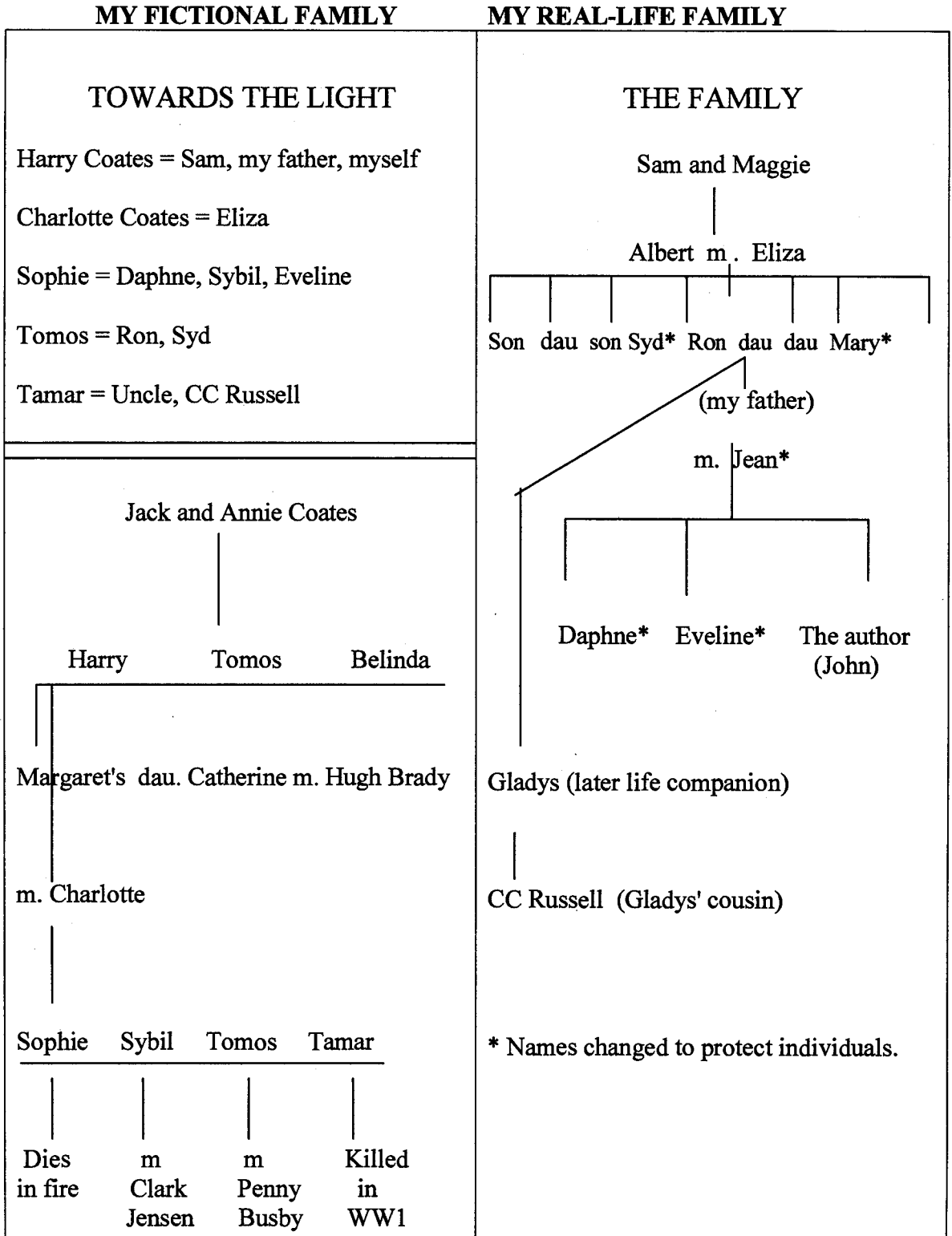
So the key to this whole narrative I have decided, is the character Catherine. Catherine, I can now admit, was born in Lostwithiel, Cornwall, on a sombre, grey afternoon in the early Spring of 1999. She seemed to come out of a 19th century grave beside a crowded little church by the river and ask me the way. I never could work out where she wanted to go; but I was sure it must be towards the light. But she had gone in an instant. The lightest place I could think of at that point was Australia, so that night I began to write and create a space in the world for her. The light made for Catherine has illumined many things since as the second line of the extract from *Towards the Light* quoted earlier in this essay reveals. The title of the text is most intimately connected with Catherine. My readers, I trust, will enjoy something of the girl's sense of belonging that she is finally free to cherish.

I have always felt the Catherine figure to be something of an enigma, a creature loaded with metaphorical significance. She might stand for country, for nation, for settler, or in combination with others from the text she inhabits, her course and actions throughout might

be used in other personifications. Most obviously Catherine might stand in place of a literature, a literature that struggles to understand its environment, that clings to a rudimentary cultural inheritance (Harry) and when this does not adequately sustain the reality of its world, causes it to dwell for a time in fantasy until, its innate strength is found to be sustaining and it strikes out to develop a creativity of its own. Always, however, there remains its fundamental inheritance which continues to be invested with a 'continuing ambivalence' which to repeat Stephen Slemon yet again, affects so much Second World writing.

My text, which overtly traces the odyssey of my Cornish great-grandfather, also maps the progress of his descendants and the complexity of belonging in the 'new' home of Australia. There are now no English-born members of my family alive. From this we can deduce that we are now all 'at home'.

APPENDIX 1.



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