

BUSH BOYS: AN OUTDOOR ADVENTURE AND THE ABC OF CAMPING

CHAPTER 1 - GOOD NEWS FROM THE MOUNTAINS

MUM SAID, "Your cousins in the Wild Bush Mountains are inviting you to go camping with them. Do you want to go?" Peter and John had just come in from school. They were struck speechless - which was unusual for them. Then they jumped with joy and excitement. Did they want to go?

"Yes, yes, a million times yes! Oh, please, Mum, please let us," Peter shouted. He had found his tongue and his voice had returned.

"And me too, Mum!" said young John.

"When do we go, Mum?" asked Peter, calming down a little. Mum waved a letter - she was reading it for the second time. "This is from your Aunty Mary at The Hills of Home in Coachwood Falls. She says that your wild young cousins invite you for the first week of the October school holidays, to go camping with them, and that they'll make bush boys out of you.

"Wow!" said Peter. "Holidays start on Friday!"

"And this is Monday," said John, and began counting on his fingers. "You mean we have to wait four days till we can go?"

His mother smiled at him. "Six days," she said. "Aunty Mary says she would like you to arrive on the ten o'clock train at Coachwood Falls next Sunday morning. And there's lots to get ready."

"What are those drawings, Mum?" asked Peter curiously, as he leaned over to look. Then, eagerly, "Are they about camping?"

"Yes," said his mother, "it's your homework, from Gregory - he's your age, Peter, so you'll follow it all right - about what to wear and what to bring." Peter reached out for Gregory's pages, but Mum waved his hand away. "Before you start on that," said his mother; "Aunty Mary is suggesting that your sisters and I invite her Kate to stay with us for that first week of the school holidays - a sort of swap. Kate is Judith's age, which will mean that Jeanette will have two younger sisters for a week. And it'll leave the two older girls freer, too, because the three young ones can look after themselves." Then she tried to look at them severely - not very successfully. "Your aunty says that Gregory insists that you must master his ABC of Camping by Sunday, or you can't go camping in the bush."

She didn't read them Aunty's further comment: "Greg believes in the Tom Sawyer principle that, if you want men and boys to do something, then make it difficult." Instead, she continued, "Please don't read them in school and get into trouble. You can read them in bed at night - even learn them off by heart. That really would impress your bushy cousins. Now, over to you."

"Thanks, Mum," said Peter, eagerly reaching for the loose sheets she held out to him. "Pictures! This should be good - seven pages of them!"

Peter and John had never been on a bush camp before. In fact, they had never been away from home. That Monday night, they put ordinary homework aside and went on talking and talking and talking. And they gloated over the pages of Gregory's ABC of Camping, especially the pictures. They read bits out to each other. It was like finding an ancient map to a treasure island. And Gregory's last sheet had a map. Six months ago, their dad, Mr Paul Cumberland, had died suddenly. And only three months ago, the Cumberland family, Mum, the two boys and four girls, had moved from interstate to this city suburb. And now, they were invited to the Wild Bush Mountains, with Greg and Bernie, whose surname also was Cumberland, since their Dad, Mr Matthew Cumberland, was a younger brother of Paul.

They had last seen their cousins two years ago, when Greg and Bernie had come interstate for a fortnight with them. They had got up to a deal of mischief together. Since then, the two Cumberland families had exchanged lots of letters and photos, and long distance phone calls. When Dad had died, Uncle Matt and Aunty Mary, and baby Beth, had come from Coachwood Falls for the funeral. Mrs O'Neill, Aunty Mary's own mother, had moved in to The Hills of Home to mind Greg and Bernie and two little sisters and a younger brother. Just as Peter and Greg were nearly the same age, so were John and Bernie, to within a few days. The brothers and cousins would make an ideal gang of four.

Peter made a map of the two Cumberland families for John: In the mountains, Father: Matthew; Mother: Mary. Their seven children: Frank who died 4 years ago Greg, Bernie, Kate, Tim, Tess, Beth (babe of 7 months) In the city, Father: Paul (R.I.P.); Mother: Elizabeth. Their six children: Margaret, Louise, Peter, John, Jeanette (his twin), Judith.

That Monday evening, long after young Judith had been put to bed, their Mum came to their room with a quiet, motherly smile of triumph. "Well," she said, "I've written to Aunty Mary to say you're coming. Read it, in case I've left anything out." Peter took the letter from his mother. He read it aloud for John's benefit, because John had trouble reading his mother's running writing:

"Dear Mary," (said the letter) "Peter and John are thrilled at your invitation, and will arrive at the Coachwood Falls railway station at ten o'clock next Sunday. Thank you ever so much. "They are impatient to get away from the suburbs. Of course, I'll miss them, but I know this adventure will do them good. "Congratulations to Gregory on his sheets. We were charmed! Where on earth does he get it from? "Yes, the boys will follow Greg's directions religiously. They are already working on it. "Since their father's death six months ago, I'm realizing that they are in a household of females. They need the companionship of good boys of their own ages, boys like Greg and Bernie. "There's only one request I must make. Boys like Peter and John, especially Peter, need a firm hand, which they have missed since Paul's passing. So if they are naughty, please deal with them exactly as you deal with your own - no favouritism because they are visitors. I've told them what to expect if they muck up. "I'm so glad Kate is coming here. She will be most welcome. Jeanette and Judith are looking forward to having her share their room. We shall expect Matt to arrive with her here, just as you suggested, on his way to the airport, early on Sunday afternoon. "As you know, I'm penny pinching and have no telephone - despite my taking in typing for the word processor - so if there's any urgent message before Sunday (or afterwards, even more so), please phone the Morgan family next door, on 54-123. They will gladly take a message. "Your fond and ever grateful sister-in-law, Elizabeth."

"OOoohh! Peter had interrupted at the part about himself. "Why did you have to say that about me, Mum?"

"Because," said Mum, "it's true, and it needed to be said. Be warned, my mischievous son." Then she said, "Now clean your teeth and say your prayers, both of you, and go to bed." She kissed her sons good night, and went off to the girls' bedrooms to say "good night" to Margaret, Louise and Jeanette.

On Tuesday, Peter and John divided Greg's ABC of Camping between them, to study under their desks at school - "smuggling contraband", Peter called it.

Peter said to John, "You take the first three pages, and I'll take the more complicated ones."

John protested, "That's not fair. You're taking four sheets, and one of yours is double sided."

Peter had to admit it. "All right," he said, "you take numbers 1, 2, 3, and that number 7 with the map, and we'll swap bundles at lunch time."

CHAPTER 2 - GREG'S ABC OF CAMPING

THE TEACHER'S VOICE droned on and his chalky hand scribbled on the blackboard. The boys and girls in the classroom heard and watched with their usual degrees of attention. Some faces were lit with interest, others looked as stolid as their minds, and the lazy ones looked sadly bored. Usually, Peter's face was one of those lit up with interest. Now he remembered his classmates telling him that back at the beginning of the year, before he had arrived at this school, Mr Ogilvie had re-arranged the desks in rows, old-style, so that it was easier for children to face the front. It certainly made it easier to conceal the camping pages on his lap, even while he kept his forefinger on the right place in the book on his desk. His conscience did not bother him a bit... Occasionally he had to write something with his felt pen, and then his knees held Greg's pages against the bottom of his desk. He thought of John. In his class, they sat in clusters. But he knew that John was on the far side of a table from his teacher, and so well-protected for smuggling operations. John occasionally ate his little lunch in class, if the pangs of hunger became too strong. This morning he would be reading the pages numbered 1, 2, 3 and 7.

Peter resumed his study of pages 4, 5 and 6 of Gregory's masterpiece. "Where on earth did he get all this from?" Peter asked himself for the umpteenth time, as he drank in the pictures and read the questions and answers over and over again

CHAPTER 3 - BUSH LORE VERSUS SCHOOL LAW

AT PLAY LUNCH, or little lunch - what teachers call recess, when they have their morning tea - Peter was surrounded by his friends. They all wanted to look at Greg's camping pictures.

"You've had them all to yourself in school," said Joe Sweeney, "so be a sport and let us have a look."

"I say, Peter," said Tom Riley, who was in Peter's scout troop, "that cousin of yours can draw real beaut."

For the sake of the boys who could not get close enough, Peter found himself reading the pages aloud. In doing so, he found he could almost recite the camping answers off by heart - and so too could some of his listeners. The answers were like poetry and as easily remembered. John was enjoying a similar experience. His friends, too, had noticed that he had been reading something under his desk during school.

"Golly," said Rex McIntosh, "just look at this boy fighting a mad dog with a stick."

"That's his staff," corrected John.

Then up raced Bully Blucher. His real name was Billy, but everyone called him Bully, because he was the worst bully in the school, and proud of it.

"Give us a look!" he demanded as he pushed his way through the boys around John. Then he shoved John in the chest and snatched the sheets from his hand.

"What a lot of rot!" snorted Bully, as he glanced at the picture of the Bush Boy, on the first sheet.

"You give'em back!" shouted John.

"I'll read'em in school," said Bully. He scrumpled the sheets into his pocket and ran off.

John and his friends set off in pursuit. Just then the bell rang over the amplifier to go back into school. John thought to himself, "What will Peter say?"

He found his older brother and had time for a few words. "Peter," he said miserably, "I've been robbed. Bully Blucher took Greg's sheets off me at little lunch."

"I'll fix him at big lunch," said Peter. "He's bigger than me, and a year older, but he's far too fat to be really good at fighting. I'll make him give them back." They joined their own classes and tramped into school.

At lunch time, the school sat around the yard eating their lunches in class groups. Half-way through, when the bell went, they were allowed to run around.

Peter found Bully with his gang in the far corner of the playground. John followed Peter.

"Heh you, Bully! Give us back those pages you pinched from my little brother," demanded Peter.

"Run away, Cumberland, or my gang'll bash you," was Bully's reply. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "And what makes you think I've got them?"

Peter wasted no more words on Bully. He rushed at him, and at the last moment turned his charge into a rugby tackle, the old sort, low down round his ankles. He swept Bully's feet from under him and bowled him to the ground with a satisfying thump, then sat on his chest, but he failed in his effort to pin Bully's arms to the ground. Bully started punching Peter in the face.

Bully's gang circled round to watch. John wondered if Peter had a chance. Other children came running from all over the yard: "Fight! Fight!" they shouted gleefully.

Peter grabbed Bully's right arm and twisted it, till he made Bully roll over onto his face. Bully could no longer punch, but he made bellowing noises instead.

"Give us back those papers!" demanded Peter.

"I haven't got'em," growled Bully, his mouth full of dirt.

"You have!" shouted Peter. He sat down on Bully's shoulders, facing his feet, and began to rummage furiously in the pockets of Bully's trousers. Bully thrashed around a bit, and heaved up and down, but it didn't make much difference.

"Got'em!" shouted Peter triumphantly, and pulled out something scrunpled and white from Bully's hip pocket. But it was only the letters that Bully had forgotten to post for his mother. Then a whirlwind seemed to strike Peter. His ears were being boxed by a new attacker.

"Peter Cumberland! You brute! Get off Billy Blucher at once! How dare you attack him!"

Peter looked up, and gasped in dismay. Of all the teachers who might have been on playground duty... "Yes, Miss Pancard," he said meekly, as he got to his feet. "I'm only trying to get my camping pages back off him," he added by way of explanation.

Bully rolled over to face upwards. He said to Peter, "Yah! Serves you right! John lent me those pages and I was reading them under the desk and just before lunch Miss Pancard took them."

John gasped in horror. How would they ever get them back from such a teacher who seemed so full of vinegar? Then his worst fears were confirmed.

Miss Pancard said to Peter in her usual superior tone of voice, "Are these what you're fighting about?" - she swung her shoulder bag from her side to the front, and pulled out four sheets of paper. The watching children caught a glimpse of Greg's drawings and maps.

"Yes, please, Miss Pancard," said Peter, reaching out eagerly. "They're part of my aunt letter to my mother."

Miss Pancard grinned cruelly at him and snapped out her words. "Then let me tell you that you'll never see these pages again, you nasty-naughty dirty-rough boy! And not another word out of you! Go and wash your filthy face and hands, then report yourself to the Deputy Principal. I hope he wallops the dust off your pants - as you so richly deserve."

No one bothered to help Bully get up, not even his own gang, and the other children felt he had got less than he deserved. Peter walked slowly across to the wash shed. He was followed at a distance by the boys and girls who had watched the fight. They wanted to see what would happen to Peter - or at least, to hear it.

John caught up to his brother at the taps. He said in a voice full of woe, "Gosh! Peter. Now that old witch Spankhard's got Greg's sheets, we'll never see them again. And you'll probably cop it hot off the Deputy."

Peter grinned at him through his bruised face. "Don't worry," he said, "Mr Ogilvie's my teacher as well as being the Deputy, and he likes me."

"Wasn't he a scoutmaster a long while ago?" asked John, hopefully.

"Yeah," said Peter, "a million years ago when he was young. But he's a real good sport. We don't call him The Old Ogre for nothing: he's strict, but he's fair - we like him. Even if he wallops me, he'll get Greg's sheets back for us from that old spooky Spankhard."

In the second half of lunch time, the Deputy Principal was always in his office, ready to deal with naughty boys and girls who were sent to him.

Peter and John marched off purposively side by side towards Mr Ogilvie's office. Again, the crowd of onlookers followed, secretly impressed at John's loyalty to Peter. Perhaps John would cop it too? But John, of course, had to stop outside, with the others. They all listened hard, but the door was shut and they couldn't hear a thing.

"Please sir," Peter said to Mr Ogilvie, "I've been sent to you for fighting by Miss Pancard - and I need your help, sir."

Mr Ogilvie kept a straight face - this was going to be one of those more original tales. "Fighting Miss Pancard?" he said, deliberately twisting what Peter had said. He couldn't stand the woman and thought it disgraceful for her to be teaching anyone, let alone older boys. But of course, he could not tell Peter that, so all he said was, "Tell me the whole story."

Peter said, "But I wasn't fighting Miss Spank... I mean Miss Pancard, sir, and I wasn't trying to hurt Bully and I was just fighting to get our camping notes back and I didn't know that Miss Pancard had already taken them off Bully." Then he took a deep breath, as he calculated in his mind how far he could go with The Old Ogre. "Sir, I'd rather you murdered me like she said, so long as I can get back the instructions we need for camping."

Mr Ogilvie was pleased to find that Peter was not telling on Bully. If anything, he was telling on Miss Pancard. He said, "Wait here," and left the room.

After all, he thought to himself, I am the Deputy, and Peter was in his class, and Bully and Miss Pancard had no right to the notes. If that woman jibbed at handing them over, he'd tell her straight she was a receiver of stolen property. That would fix her properly. He was away five minutes.

When he returned, he said to Peter, "I've just been to the staff room for a word with Miss Spankhard - oh! I mean Miss Pancard." Only now he realized that he had called her to her face by the children's marvellous nickname for her - it had just slipped off his tongue. "Comes of thinking of her like that," he told himself. No wonder she had glowered at him; nevertheless, she had reluctantly handed over the confiscated pages at his request. Now he reminded himself that discipline must be preserved, for Peter's own sake. He put on his severe look, for which he was renowned. "Now tell me the truth, young Cumberland." He paused. "Were you reading more of these camping notes under your desk all through my lessons this morning?"

"Gosh!" thought Peter, "Bully must have put me in to her when he was sprung himself." He looked The Old Ogre in the eye, and said, "Yes, sir, I was reading this half of them." He pulled out Greg's pages, numbers 4, 5 and 6, and passed them to Mr Ogilvie.

Mr Ogilvie was bursting with curiosity to look at the pictures and text. But he reluctantly put them down on his desk.

"Yes, Peter," he said, "she thinks you ought to have the dust walloped off your pants for fighting. So just bend over that chair."

Out of the corner of his eye, Peter saw him pick up the feather duster from the window-sill. "Ah, well," he thought, "it's worth it to get the camping instructions back," for he was sure that whatever else The Old Ogre did, he would not fail him in giving back the precious camping notes.

But The Old Ogre turned out even better than Peter had hoped: he reversed the feather duster and Peter got four with the soft end. "If she asks you," he said with a grin, as Peter stood up, "you can tell her I really dusted your pants." "Gee! Thank you, sir," said Peter. Some teachers did understand boys, he thought to himself. Next, Mr Ogilvie reached into his breast pocket - as an old-fashioned teacher he always wore a coat. He pulled out the scrumpled pages 1, 2, 3 and 7.

Then he continued, "Now listen, Peter. You can have these back on two conditions: you won't be sneaky reading in class again when I'm wearing my brain to the bone trying to teach you; and second, you let me make photocopies for myself. Oh, a third condition: I'd like a copy of the rest of them - these on the table. They do look interesting. But it's just as well that I didn't catch you in the act of reading them in school..." - he looked at the feather duster and Peter knew what he meant. "Fair enough," he thought to himself.

Again, Mr Ogilvie went off to the staff room. Peter knew the photocopier was there. In another five minutes, he came back dragging John with him. He had spotted him loitering outside. "No reading under the desk in school, young John," he said with pretended fierceness, and then waved them away. As the brothers gleefully left his office, they could hear him muttering to himself something about "situations alter cases". John didn't know what that meant and didn't care either - as long as the passport to adventure was back in their possession. Then the bell went for afternoon school, and the brothers had to part. That afternoon, Peter paid proper attention to his lessons, and was rewarded by a big wink from Mr Ogilvie as he passed close to his desk at the end of school.

CHAPTER 4 - THE JOURNEY TO COACHWOOD FALLS

WHEN THE BOYS arrived home on Tuesday afternoon they settled down to lots of tea and loads of buttered toasted bun loaf. Mrs Cumberland looked at Peter's face, and said, "Peter! Jeanette told me you'd been fighting. You'd better explain yourself."

Peter thought to himself, "Just like a girl to go and tell," but in fairness to her, he knew that his battered face would have given him away.

Peter and John poured forth their tale. Mum was sympathetic. She didn't ask them about reading under their desks, so they saw no reason to mention it.

"But what if we hadn't got 'em back?" said John. "That crawler Bully or cranky Spankhard might have burnt 'em out of spite, and we wouldn't know what to take any more."

Peter grinned at his brother. "Last night," he said triumphantly, "I learnt all the stuff on those first three sheets off by heart. Remember, Mum suggested it? I could have written out most of it from memory, and No. 7 was a rough map - Greg'll have other copies."

On Wednesday afternoon Mum took them shopping. A new knapsack was bought at the Scout Shop for Peter. It had been agreed that John would accept the offer in his aunt's letter of a loan of an old one of Greg's, which Greg had used when he was John's age. Peter's Mum had already given him a sleeping bag when he became a Scout. John was to take a blanket, as listed in Greg's alternatives on his fourth sheet. Similarly both boys were taking enamel bowls, as an acceptable alternative to dixies. They had their enamel mugs and would share Peter's scout knife. But Greg's fourth sheet also had its problems. "I'm glad to see," said Mum, "that you're going to clean your teeth and use face-washers and combs." The boys looked at each other - Greg might just possibly be guilty of believing in toothbrushes, but he could not possibly believe in combs, let alone face washers.

Again, Mum's reaction to Greg's sixth sheet was the exact opposite of Peter and John's. Obviously, the sixth sheet was for hardy souls who look disaster in the face with the same calm with which they look upon good fortune. Mum said, "Greg's Midnight Horror Movie! If I thought any of those awful things might happen, I wouldn't let you go." Peter and John said nothing - and longed for Adventure.

Their tatty old khaki shorts and shirts were washed and ironed. Peter and John didn't mind their clothes being washed, but they had never set any value whatever on ironing. Dad's old bush hats of khaki felt were dug out of the junk room. Mum said, "We'll show that scamp Gregory that two can play at his games," and she proceeded to stitch on some spare cotton boot laces as chin straps.

She said, "There's nothing worse than your hat blowing away. When it's not windy, you can flick the chin strap over the back of your head out of the way. And make sure you raise your hats to your aunt and uncle."

Peter and John said they would; but of course, they forgot when the time came.

The days passed quickly, just as Mum had said they would. On Friday, they finished school for the October holidays. Breaking up paled its insignificant fires alongside the coming Adventures which lay ahead of them in the Wild Bush Mountains. They could think and talk of nothing else. Their big sisters were easy-going, kindly creatures like their mother. For them, little boys were pests, always scuffling, and their own young brothers no exception. "Those boys!" they would exclaim, and exchange looks, and wrinkle their noses and pretend to frown.

But with all the talk of tents and fires, and of single-stick combat with wild dogs - or was it mad dogs? - probably much the same anyway - the big girls too were caught up in the expectancy and excitement created by the boys. The younger girls looked on their brothers with something akin to reverence. Yet they would be glad to get rid of them for a while and have Kate in their place.

Then Sunday dawned, a cheery morning of crisp air and clear bright blue. "Glory be!" said the city Cumberlands.

Peter and John trooped out to breakfast in their good clothes, their faces scrubbed and hair parted - perfectly, according to their boyish standards.

"Good morning," said their mother. And then, teasingly, "Still sure you want to go?"

John started to protest, but Peter just grinned. "Are the girls still going to Sunday School this morning, Mum?"

"Best they do, especially with Margaret in the Confirmation class," she said. "You can say good bye before we walk down to the station."

Peter carried a medium sized suitcase. It contained the bulky things like his sleeping bag and John's blanket. When the sleeping bag was in his knapsack, there was not much room for anything else. John wore the knapsack which contained their camping hardware: mugs, bowls, spoons, all wrapped up so as not to rattle in the neatly folded shorts and shirts they would wear on their arrival. Only their bush hats looked somewhat out of place - but the knapsack explained everything.

At a quarter to eight, after a dutiful and shy farewell to their four sisters (amid girlish giggles), they had set out with their mother for the ten minute walk to the railway station. There she bought them return tickets to Coachwood Falls. "Coachwood Falls? M'am! It's nought but a whistle stop. The boys must warn the guard at The Junction, so he'll stop the train for them to get off." Even getting there would be an adventure. They sat down to wait for the train.

"You've each got your \$2 coin for emergencies?" she asked.

"Yes thanks, Mum," they replied.

In came the train. She said "Good bye, God bless you and keep you," gave them a pat on the head and a quick kiss, and they were aboard and at the window.

"Remember," she said, "about changing trains at The Junction?"

"Aw! Mum, we will," protested Peter.

The train glided ever more swiftly from the station and Mum was lost to sight. The suburban train was nothing new to them, but at The Junction they entered an inter-urban train such as they had never known before. They reported to the guard, who said, "Coachwood Falls. Eh! Yes, we'll stop, but only for you." Most adults find a journey boring - because they are such dull people themselves. The boys, innocent of heart and fairly ignorant in mind, were agog with interest: to them all things were new. Time flew by. From a curve in the line they glimpsed the dull grey-green of eucalypts on hilly slopes: they were coming to the foot hills of the Wild Bush Mountains. The train's electric power took it effortlessly up the gradient. There was none of that laboured chuffing of former times, when the energies harnessed by man could but gradually win their hard-fought contest over gravity. Then came the exciting part. A whisper-rumour swept the half-full carriage, "Grand Chasm Creek!" The boys, whose noses were buttoned on the window glass, were joined on the left of the train by some of the adult passengers. They gazed in wonder. The train rushed heedlessly along. Its iron way was perched on a narrow ledge half way down a precipice. Cliffs rose sheer above them on the right, and a sheer drop lay below them on their left. The train seemed ideally placed to slither off the cliff and plunge a hundred metres to its doom, where it might lie for ever among the boulders, big as houses, which lay scattered in the gorge. Across the chasm, opposite them, rose a matching cliff on whose brink there clung the scrubbier species of the eucalypt. It was a terrifying sight, but also one which filled them with the deepest satisfaction. It seemed to proclaim, "Here ends your domain, O Man, and here Mine begins. Enter - if you dare!"

The train swept through a sudden cutting, whose low left cliff obscured the Chasm. They had a final glimpse of it as the train curved left, and they could see the front carriages across the void. Then they plunged into a tunnel. Their friendly railway guard appeared. "Nearly there, boys!" he said.

Peter asked him, "Suppose the train jumped off the rails into the gorge? What would happen to us?"

The guard laughed - he had sons of his own, and said, "We railway men keep the train on the rails by sticking to this little book" - he pulled out a flattish cream volume from his pocket - "our Safe Working Catechism for Locomotive Enginemen." Peter and John could read the title for themselves. The guard continued, "Driving trains is a life-and-death situation, but you're

safe - as long as we go by this book." Peter and John had not known that such a book existed, but were glad to hear that it did.

He pointed to the sliding door. "We used to have a notice near the doors (for boys, of course) about holding on tight. It said, `SAFETY FIRST'. That's like our trains, Safety First, all the way!" And Peter and John remembered the heading on Greg's 6th sheet.

By now they had burst out into daylight once more, and the scene was changed to little hillocks, obscuring any voids which lay beyond. The train slowed, and the station signs proclaimed, COACHWOOD FALLS. They had arrived.

CHAPTER 5 - THE HILLS OF HOME

Lined up on the platform where Uncle Matt and Aunt Mary, Greg, Bernie, Kate, Timmy and Tess. Baby Beth was in her mother's arms. That they were welcome could not have been more obvious.

Apparently the mountain Cumberlands had come from Church. Greg and Bernie were as tidy as Peter and John.

Aunt Mary gave them a big hug and a kiss. They shook hands with Uncle Matt, and then there was a great shaking of hands, enthusiastically between the boys and shyly with Kate and Tess. Uncle Matt reminded Peter and John that he would be driving them all out to The Hills of Home, but then leaving immediately with Kate for the city. But this would make no difference to the boys. He had to fly to Tasmania on business, and would not see them again until Tuesday night. Meanwhile Kate would be staying with Peter and John's mother and sisters.

Mr Cumberland swung the big passenger van out of the station yard. For a short distance, they headed north, away from the western railway line. Mrs Cumberland sensed the bewilderment of Peter and John, who were staring out the windows, looking for the town of Coachwood Falls. There were a few houses scattered about, but where was the town?

"Truth to tell," she said, "our Coachwood Falls is a backwater - fifty human beings and a few dogs! The railway station here was once a busier concern when it transported all the fruit."

"But now a Sleepy Hollow," added her husband.

They reached the T-intersection with the highway, and turned left. There was a fleeting glimpse of The General Store, a rambling premises on the far side of the main road, full of curiosities and secrets, as well as good plain fare. Here and there they passed scattered residences, and some large apple orchards.

"There's a belt of deep, rich soil here," said Mr Cumberland, "crisp winter, but no frosts in spring. It's great for apples, you know. Oranges like it milder - even if they're on raw sandstone." Then he slowed the van, and swung off left onto a gravel road so trivial that most folk pass it unnoticed. It crossed the railway line on a rickety overpass and became a simple dirt road, heavily rutted, passed through a lower swampy area and then continued to rise gradually.

Peter pulled out Greg's maps from his hip pocket - sheet No. 7, and tried to work out where they were. But Greg said, "Never mind the map for the moment. Look at the lie of the land - the ridge we're on and the gorge over there." He pointed. As they took another turn right, they caught a glimpse of another chasm on their left. "That," said Greg, "is Coachwood Creek, before it plunges over Coachwood Falls." Next an apple orchard behind an old post-and-rail fence. "Look! look!" cried John. "Pigs!"

"O'Reilly's," said Mrs Cumberland. "Lots of apples, but breeding pigs is his first love. It's an unusual combination - except when you serve apple sauce with pork." Then the dirt road swung left. "The home stretch," said Mr Cumberland. "Over half-way - less than ten minutes to go." The van bumped slowly over the potholes which no driver could have dodged. There was another property on their left. "Not a farm, really, that one," said Mrs Cumberland. "It was subdivided from O'Reilly's when he was going broke. The Gladstones bought it, but they have no kiddies, poor things." Then straight ahead were two great gate posts, sawn from the trunk of some substantial tree. On the right hand post was a sign board: The Hills of Home, M. & M. Cumberland. Under it was one of those round mail boxes made from a 20 litre drum. "There's no delivery of letters any more," said Mr Cumberland. "We have to pick up our mail at The General Store - it's a Post Office too."

The rutted road swept right in a parkland of small eucalypts: "Re-afforestation after farming," said Greg, importantly. And there, behind the house were two peaky hillocks in the sweep of the ridge.

"The Hills of Home," chanted the children several times, including Peter and John, even while they were drawing up at the front door.

"Our place used to be called Twin Peaks," said Bernie, "but Mum and Dad renamed it The Hills of Home, which is even better."

Mr Cumberland and Kate were leaving at once on their longer journey. It was an affectionate parting. Peter and John thanked Uncle Matt "for having them". They were delighted to see that his three sons tilted their heads up for him to kiss their foreheads, as their own Dad used to do. Kate dutifully waved good-bye to her brothers and cousins, and kissed her little sisters.

Mr Cumberland lifted Kate aboard, tooted dah-dah-dah dah-d'-dah on the horn, swung the van around and was out of sight in moments. Greg said, "That's morse code for OK." Mrs Cumberland and the younger children led the way inside. "First things first," she said. "I'll telephone that Morgan family next door to your mother, to say you've arrived safely." "Thank you, Aunt Mary," said Peter and John.

Greg and Bernie took charge of their cousins. They led them down a short and carpeted corridor, then left into a longer lino-covered corridor. At its very end they turned left into a room. "This is the bush boys' bed room," they chanted proudly. "Dump your knapsack, John, and your suitcase, Peter, and dig out your old clothes." Peter and John rummaged in the knapsack, and pulled out their khaki shirts and shorts.

Greg had been primed by his mother for this moment. He said, "Perhaps you would like some coat hangers for your good pants and shirts." Peter and John dragged their good clothes across the hangers, with total disregard for their purpose. Greg flung them in the wardrobe. Bernie and he stowed away their Sunday best and got into their bush outfits.

"With Kate gone to Aunt Elizabeth's," explained Bernie, "Timmy is moving into her bunk," - he pointed across the corridor to the girls' bedroom - "the top one, with Tess underneath."

Peter and John looked at the double-decker bunks in their room. That to the left was clearly Greg's and Bernie's. That to the right must be theirs. "Bags the top!" they yelled in a dead heat.

Greg settled that at once. "The oldest is always on top," he said, "just like I am with Bernie." Such are the rights of older brothers everywhere. Then Greg pointed through a door: "The bathroom's there. You first. The clean towels are yours."

The travellers from suburbia were ravenous. It was hours since they had had anything to eat. Their mouths watered at the sight of the corn beef, tomato and lettuce, bread rolls, butter, cheese and jam on the table, and the bowls of apples. There was also the big tea pot with its woolly cosy. They ate and drank a lot, but were scarcely aware of it at all. There was just so much to talk about. Peter and John were full of questions. "Haven't you a dog?" asked John, of everyone in general.

"We did have," said Greg, "called Toby."

"But he got old and died," said Bernie.

"And then the Koala Creek area was added to the Wild Bush Mountains National Park," said Greg, "and dogs are banned in National Parks. My friend the Ranger would have had to stop us taking a dog with us." It was obvious that Greg wouldn't dream of going against his friend the Ranger.

"Greg and Bernie almost live in the National Park," said Mrs Cumberland, "so any new dog would have a nervous breakdown when they trotted off without him into the hills."

"How big's the river we're going to?" asked Peter, changing the subject.

Greg replied, "It's not a river. A river is wider and flows all the time. We've a creek, a series of pools."

Bernie added, "Our swimming pools."

Greg looked serious. "Most of the pools are not deep. Dad has very strict rules for our bush swimming safety: we must not go into water deeper than our shoulders, and we must never dive in, or bomb on top of anyone." His mother nodded approvingly.

Peter said, "Oh, we won't mind. At home, we have to pay to go into swimming pools."

John said, "What's bombing?"

Peter knew all about bombing, "You know, jumping in near someone to make a great splash - but you can break his neck if he moves and you land on him."

Then Bernie said, "Mum, may we be excused, please?" She waved towards the door; they jumped to their feet, snatched their bushy hats from the cupboard top, and were gone.

The four boys burst out the kitchen door in a solid mass. In the big yard at the back of the house they paused to look about them. They set out on a tour of the property. After that, Greg said, "We'll take you up to the saddle, to show you the view of the Wild Bush Mountains."

"What's a saddle?" demanded Peter.

"A saddle? It's the lowest part of the ridge between those two hills - the ones that give our house its name, The Hills of Home. It's called a saddle because it's like the saddle on a horse. You know, it slopes down on each side and slopes up on each end." Peter didn't know, but later on Greg made him a model in the sand, and then he understood. They crossed the cleared land and entered the trees. The trees pressed about them, blocking any view. Through them, their route lay gently upwards to the saddle, whence it levelled, before the steep descent. In the saddle, timber was sparse, and, for the first time, Peter and John could see the far horizons, south and west. Of late, familiarity had led Greg and Bernie to take the view for granted. But, in the presence of their cousins, they were seeing it through other eyes, and a new realisation of its splendour dawned upon them. All four of them felt its awesomeness -- and somehow sensed that, when a boy beheld the wonder of the world, there was no place for evil in his heart. Framed by tree trunks were the peaks and ridges of the Wild Bush Mountains, stretching out, endlessly, effortlessly. Their vastness challenged the puniness of man, as did their silence and their mystery. It silenced the four boys - for quite some moments.

South-south-west, and closer to them, a labyrinth of ridges and valleys lay lower than the distant peaks. Among them one mountain, dome-shaped and lordly, rose a little higher than its fellows. "That one's called Mount Everest," said Greg. "It was named that as a joke, but we've renamed it, 'The Lonely Mountain', from The Hobbit."

"Is there a dragon there?" asked John, with a knowing grin.

"No, but there are Crocodile Rocks where we're going tomorrow," said Greg, "so watch out they don't eat you."

"What are those distant mountains, sort of savage looking?" asked Peter. He pointed. Far away beyond Mount Everest, right on the edge of sight, jagged peaks gnawed at the sky.

"They're called the Warrigals," said Bernie.

"The Warrigals are the wildest part of all the Wild Bush Mountains," said Greg. "Warrigal is aboriginal for dingo and wild dog. Those peaks look like his teeth, taking chunks out of the sky."

Again, the four boys gazed in silent wonder.