

Chapter 10

Survival Style

THAT same morning at *Terra Sancta*, Mr Max Lawson told his class of five: “Yesterday, the folk at school said today’s weather forecast is for a sizzler.”

He surprised Jack and Jim by giving what was, for him, really a direct order. “You’d better not go in the bush today.” And then he got on with his lesson. “We’ll try some science on cooling by evaporation.”

Five hankies were soaked in water and shaken vigorously to evaporate some of it. Another five were kept dry. Pressed onto faces tested coolness. As Jim described it so delicately to his mother, “Dad waffled on about 540 calories for every gram of water — and tied it up with ‘deliver us from Evil’. Wow!”

Mum and Nanna exchanged little smiles. Nanna told them, “We’re doing all that with the Koolgardie Safe” — she pointed to the verandah. “Even without a breeze, the evaporation’s keeping the butter firm.”

Dad left to catch his train. His only concession to the heat was to wear a hat and carry his coat over one arm. His heavy case of gadgetry and teaching aids did not slow his long fast stride.

After morning tea, Mum and baby Bridget, without Nanna, drove off in the van for Galway Crags and the weekly shopping. The van’s only air conditioning was windows gaping wide — a continuous blast of hot air. She took the extra copy of the *Cubby Cave Journal* vol. 2 as a gift for Miss Tanglewebb, the genealogist. That journal was written ages ago by the boarders of the old Guntawang Academy between 1897 and 1914.

She also bore a note from Jack to Mr Mistry at the

St Vincent de Paul shop: "Please sell Mum a pair of aluminium dixies with high sides and handles that fold over the top. Your grateful friend, Jack Lawson."

Mum and the babe were to lunch at Mahoney's and enjoy their evaporative cooler. There Max would join them for tea.

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At *Terra Sancta*, the rest of the family simply aimed to survive. They did — but only just. The heat nearly beat them. However, the old-fashioned high ceilings, and the airy chamber under the high-pitched roof, and the very wide verandahs, helped keep things tolerable.

Nanna, of course, was in charge. She knew better than to expect much schoolwork in such heat, and the morning passed pleasantly without upsets.

After lunch, Jack told Nanna, "It's worse than last Sunday when Simon and Dominic were conking out."

"Gotcha!" she said, "you never told me about that!"

Jack grinned. "So we'll saw and split wood in the shade of the woodshed roof. We'll need to stockpile some extra, what with visitors coming tomorrow."

She cautioned them, "Don't work too hard; don't squabble; have plenty to drink and plenty of rests."

The twins, too, promised to stay out of the sun. "We'll potter around on indoor jobs, and leave the garden for a cooler day.

Later, Kathleen came out to the woodheap, avoiding the sun by way of the new laundry. Her first news was, "Kanga's so conked with the heat he's letting the lizards crawl over him."

"Wowie!" cried Jim. "Usually he snaps at them."

Next a more important message. She smiled on her brothers. "Jack, Nanna said that, on a scorcher like this, plants must only be watered when the day cools"

— here she paused to chuckle — “ but children need to be watered in the heat. She’s told Colleen and me and Tilly to get in our bathers and hose ourselves like last Sunday, on the grass in the strip of shade at the back of the old laundry, and hose Tommy and Billy as well. She said the new nozzle has a sprinkler and you don’t have to squirt it with your thumb anymore.”

At this point, Jim interrupted. “Aha! so that’s why she told me to shovel up the pooh and put fresh water in the bathtub.” He meant the horses’ drinking trough.

Kathleen nodded. Then she went on, “After we girls’ve finished and you boys’ve had your workmen’s showers, you’re allowed to have a waterfight in your shorts. She used Mum’s blah about ‘just for this once’.” Fancy Gran using Mum and Dad’s blah. They chuckled.

In the outcome, Nanna’s decrees were taken as rubbery and stretchable. When young Tommy heard about it, he told the twins very firmly, “Me an’ Billy are boys, so we’ll stay for their waterfight as well, yo ho yep yes we will.” After such a Joe-style quote, they really had to let them. It was too hot for hassling.

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Jack turned the hose nozzle from sprinkle to jet. Then, as heavy artillery, Jim got the laundry dippers for pitching water in quantity from the old bathtub.

They heaved their first dipperfuls at Joe. Jack got his chest and Jim his shoulder blades. It was a deluge like The Thunderfall, and completely soaked Joe’s shorts. After this, squirting with a low pressure hose seemed like using a fly swat on a kangaroo.

Nevertheless, Joe snatched the hose from Billy and squirted Jack and Jim in the face. They refilled their dippers and heaved water at Tommy and Billy. Then

they turned back for refills to heave at each other.

After that, Jack chose teams — Jack, Tommy and Billy would fight Jim and Joe. The waterfight went on for some time... and very happily.

In the kitchen, Nanna smiled to herself as she heard yells of triumph and squeals of delight. It was good being a grandmother.

Kathleen banged the bell on the corner of the open woodshed. It was out of sight of the lawn and she did not peep round, but simply called, "Boys! Time to dry and dress."

"Okay, Kath, coming," they called.

They hurried back to the old laundry. Jack and Jim washed the little boys' feet, towelled them all over and sent them clad in towels to the twins. The three older boys washed their own feet and wrung out their shorts. Again, towels served double roles, to dry with and to wear. They hung the shorts on the line — they'd be dry by nightfall — thence to their bedroom to get into summer pyjamas.

Here they got a surprise to outclass all surprises. Fast asleep on the two lower bunks were Greg and Bernie!

And wearing night shirts!

Nanna beckoned from the door. "Sorry," she hissed. "I meant to catch you before you went in. Your precious pals staggered into the kitchen on their last gasp while you were still waterfighting. I gave 'em bowls of salty soup, all watery-thin, and mugs of sweet tea, an' told them to shower in the grown-ups' bathroom, and *ordered* them into night-shirts — your Mum's got a few for emergency pyjamas for unexpected visitors. Greg didn't mind, but Bernie nearly had a fit. He complained he'd look like a spook — and feel like one."

Nanna emphasized her account by acting it: "I juttet

out my jaw like this” — it was impressive — “and told him firmly, ‘Watch it! You nearly ended up a spook — and you still could!’”

She smiled around at Jack, Jim and Joe while Greg and Bernie slept on, and concluded, “That’ll teach him to argue with a woman!” and her grandsons remembered what Dad had so often told them.

She concluded, “I’ve phoned the Cumberlands and explained how Greg and Bernie are unfit to travel, and must stay for tea, and probably for the night. They’re dehydrated and exhausted, but they’ll be all right.”

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THE SHY SPY TRIPLETS, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, as Greg had dubbed them, limped out of the bush, as dehydrated and exhausted as the Cumberlands. They had come by the Pup Ridge route which joined the track they had come down earlier.

They skirted the *Terra Sancta* fence and limped painfully along Swampy Ridge Road to the first bend. From here, the homestead was only just in sight.

They were on their last gasp before exhaustion struck them down — perhaps to lie down and die...

What they did not know was that A Watcher had spotted them and was observing them closely...

They dragged their hidden bikes from the bushes onto the track, swung a weary right leg over the bar, and pedalled just enough to get up momentum. After that, they switched on their electric motors, for these were Battery Boosted Bikes. They crept up the gentle slope of Swampy Ridge Road to the really bad bit at The Jumpback.

It was far too steep for pedaling any bike, even auxiliary pedaling with electric motors.

They got off and let the motors pull the bikes. The

electricity helped pull the boys too, as long as they helped it a little by lifting their weary legs, over and over again, to let the motors pull them forward.

Shadrach's Dad was scheduled to meet the boys at the Guntawang level crossing. It was a spot calculated not to attract attention, and suggested nothing more than someone meeting the train.

His sons always addressed him as 'Sir' — which means father or sire anyway — though they spoke of him to others as 'Father'. He saw at once that the three boys were 'all in'. He bought three huge bottles of Dry Ginger Ale at the General Store, and the boys swigged from the bottles as he drove. They were long past being chirpy, and had nothing to say.

At home, their mother greeted her older and younger son and her nephew. At home they were *not* known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

After restoratives came baths. Shadrach was through first, and reported to Father.

He began with an apology. "Sir, I'm sorry, but it was too hot for exploring. We only just got out of the bush alive."

He went on to describe their taking refuge in the shady pool. Dad smiled approvingly. "Quite right. But don't worry Mother or the Academy. They mightn't understand that circumstances alter cases."

His Dad went on gravely. "Don't blame yourself, son. All day, the hospital here in Galway Craggs has overflowed with sun-stroke collapses, some young, some old. You've done well. Just learn from it. And you haven't let me down. The job's just a deal more difficult than I thought." He paused, for in fact he was keeping his trusty elder son in the dark about what he really hoped they would find.

Shadrach went on to tell Father of their face-to-face encounter with the Cumberlands; how he had been careful not to give anything away: no names, addresses, or reasons for being in the bush. Dad look grateful.

Yet once more Shadrach puzzled to himself, "What on earth is Father really up to?" Finally, Dad told him to leave the writing up of journals till the morning.

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MEANWHILE, Nanna told Jack, "Wake the sleeping beauties." She knew that the food and drink and good cheer of the Lawson *convivium* would be a restorative, even with Max and Meg away.

And it did in fact proceed merrily.

Until the meal, Greg and Bernie had had no chance to tell Jack, Jim and Joe of their afternoon's doings. So they were busting to report. Nor were they the only ones. Not even Nanna could fathom how Colleen had managed to bottle up her late afternoon news.

At the convivium, Colleen went first. She riveted them — not only her brothers, but Greg and Bernie as well. "We'd just finished hosing the littlies. Tommy and Billy stayed for the big boys' waterfight. I made sure Tilly was dressed okay, but Kath beat me back to the kitchen to help Nanna. *Something* prompted me to peep out a hole in our shutter... She paused dramatically. They hung on her words. Cutlery ceased its clatter, jaws their chewing. She went on, "I could see outside across the verandah..." Another pause. "Three boys were stumbling dead-beat through the bits of shade. They were just outside our fence at the southwest corner. Their clothes were quality, not like Jack, Jim and Joe's, but they looked worse, all scuffled."

No one interrupted. She paused again, then, "I raced up the ladder to the ceiling, up the second ladder

to the Roof Room" — she nodded to Greg and Bernie — "we showed you on Tuesday. Kath and I've got the ancient telescope up there — the boys found it in Old Fred's workshop. I propped up the shutter on the western side. The sun blazed in my eyes. Those bedraggled boys were limping along Swampy Ridge Road — they were all-in. I focused the telescope. It was just as they were vanishing round the bend in the road. They lunged off to the left, into the scrub. I thought they were collapsing in the shade. But no, a minute later, they limped out wheeling bikes: blue, red, green, gold." She turned to Jack, Jim and Joe. "What coloured bikes did you see on Tuesday?"

They shook their heads. Being boys, they had not noticed colours...

So Colleen continued, "Even holding their bikes seemed to improve them. They brushed off leaves and sticks, got on, cranked one turn of the pedals, then kept going without pedaling! So they must have electric motors — and off they went to Guntawang. Now what'd you think of that?"

Jack said, "It's the first time we've known them to come in by Swampy Ridge Road. That's important."

Jim wanted to know, "Were they in uniforms?"

Colleen replied, "Now you mention it, their shorts and short-sleeved shirts did look much the same — and their boater hats. Oh, and only one had a knapsack."

Greg and Bernie grinned and wearily nodded agreement. As yet, the Lawsons had not heard their news, and the Cumberlands were themselves so weary they were content to wait till called upon.

Colleen told Nanna, "I reckon Greg and Bernie are just as frazzled as those three strangers. So we can't let them walk home — they'll need to be driven."



LIMPED HOME ON BATTERY BOOSTED BIKES

Nanna studied Greg and Bernie carefully. "Inside you're bodies you're dried out like wet towels on a clothesline. You're too exhausted to be driven home tonight, let alone to walk by yourselves through the bush." Again, she jutted her jaw. "You'll have to stay the night — I'll ring your Dad and Mum."

It was no time for scruples about saving money. She used the mobile phone to get Greg's Dad.

Mr Cumberland thanked her profusely, but added, "Maybe if they bounce back after an early breakfast, they could walk home in the cool of the morning." Nanna did not bother arguing. He had not seen them. He did not realize how it was...

Only now did Greg and Bernie speak. "I was a goat," Greg admitted, "to go bush on such a day." His account was even more gripping than Colleen's. Nor did it lose in the telling, even in barest summary.

That night, the Lawsons skipped their Log Books.

Jack quoted Dad: "*In extremis, extrema tentanda sunt*" — and he translated — "It means that in extreme cases, extreme measures are called for."

After that the prayers were put through briskly.

The Cumberlands made feeble protests about helping with the washing up. Again, Nanna's jaw jutted. "No! Thank you for offering. No! Straight to bed you go, and Jack'll make sure there are water jugs and mugs for when you wake thirsty in the night."

Back in the kitchen, the twins took charge of the washing up and their brothers did as they were told.

There was no reading that night. When Mr and Mrs Lawson got back, five weary boys were lost in deep and dreamless sleep — except when they woke to drink.

Chapter 11

The Narrow Way

THE SHY SPY TRIPLETS, as the Lawsons called them, whom the Cumberlands had named Shadrach, Mesach and Abednego, woke quite subdued that Friday morning. Unusually, Mother, as they addressed her, had to wake them for school in Galway Crag.

With reluctance she did so. Yet they ate a huge breakfast with normal healthy gusto. This reassured her. But even then, after good sleep and good food, they set out with leaden feet.

“Remember, it’s your last day of school,” she called encouragingly. “Your holidays start today.”

It was calculated to revive them. The cooler day helped, too. By the time they came home for lunch, they had ‘bounced back’ — ready once more for their mysterious bush activities.

Today, Father was home for lunch. He carefully studied his sons and nephew. Then he ruled, “You take it easy this afternoon. Just loaf around. Don’t try to go very far or do very much. Then you might be fit for a big all-day effort tomorrow.”

They got going soon after, and this time better provisioned. They had a billy and the makings for tea, some biscuits, and a big bottle of water for emergencies. Father declared that the Cumberlands were quite right, and that time spent boiling a billy was not wasted.

Indeed, he seemed quite approving of everything the Cumberlands did, and the Lawsons, too.

This time the Triplets kept right well away from *Terra Sancta*. Rather than skirt its southwest corner, they rode their bikes bumpety-bump down the steep

grassy slope of Luigi's cow pasture. They ignored the cattle and the cattle ignored them, never pausing in their rhythmic grazing or chewing the cud.

At the foot of the hill they propped their bikes against the shady side of the milking shed, and set off downstream. They criss-crossed Koala Creek back and forth, in search of the easiest walking.

At Little Bogie — they had seen it yesterday — young brother Mesach remarked hopefully, "That cave'd be good to get out of the sun." By this he meant he wanted a swim in the pool.

But big brother Shadrach said, "The Lawson's place is just up that ladder. After the last couple of days they're most likely to come out spying on us again."

When the crown of the big fig tree came into view, they knew they were abreast of The Secret Water. And again they missed the secret entrance to Cubby's Canyon, hidden by the guardian she-oaks and turpentine.

By now, all three felt fit to keep going. Despite instructions to 'take it easy', their intent had been to continue exploring the area originally assigned them. There would be side-creeks coming in on the north and they would recognize the Big Bogie from their Wednesday visit from the other direction.

For the first time they heard the booming of The Thunderfall. They marveled at the giddy leap of fast-flowing water, and never saw another narrow break in the cliff line. They beheld a wonderful pool, and only now did Shadrach remember Father had told him of it. Its allure was too good to forego. They scrambled down on the south side, and crossed back to the north.

Shadrach decreed that this was the place to 'take it easy'. And the others could not have agreed more.

They heaped up a few rocks as a fireplace, lit a fire,

and set their billy over it. Clearly, the Cumberland influence was already strong upon them.

Till yesterday, as they told Greg, their only swimming was at school, not even in the municipal pool. In spite of much roaming the bush, only yesterday's scorcher had driven them to swim in a bush pool. They repeated that happy experience.

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FRIDAY MORNING at *Terra Sancta*, like that in Galway Crag, was certainly *not* as usual.

All through the night, the five boys had often woken for drinks of water. In the morning, Greg and Bernie felt refreshed, yet with a great lethargy upon them.

As for Jack, Jim and Joe, they were still very tired from yesterday's sawing and axing in the heat, even at the shaded woodheap. However, Friday was a laundry day and the twin washerwomen expected fires roaring early in the coppers.

Before breakfast, Dad himself declared that any new schoolwork would be 'counter-productive' — a typical Daddy-word. At breakfast, he added, "It's the First Friday of December and I'd meant to take the family to Mass in Galway Crag, but not a family all worn out from yesterday and visitors that won't fit in the van."

Mum added, "They're too fuddled to learn anything."

She went on, "Better they take it very easy and recover. Besides, it would be rude to Greg and Bernie, what with them waiting to be picked up by their Mum."

Breakfast was on a grander scale — scrambled eggs on toast as well as porridge. And lots and lots of tea. It was almost a convivium. Then Dad left for work.

The conversation picked up with The Shy Spy Triplets the sole topic. Greg and Bernie recounted more details of their meeting them at The Secret Water.

Joe looked severely at Greg and Bernie. "Yous missed out," he reproached them. "Yous missed the chance to do my Third Plan for catching 'em."

Jim had to explain Joe's three plans. And that the fiendish third plan was pinching their clothes while they were swimming, to persuade them to tell all their secrets.

Bernie protested, "Blackmail's not honourable."

Greg added, "And it's not the Golden Rule — you wouldn't like them doing it to you when you were sunstruck." He turned to Jack and Jim. "Those three were your Shy Spy Triplets all right." Then to Joe: "It's a pity we didn't find out more. There was a tube thing poking out of their knapsack that might've been a telescope. And peeping out a side pocket I caught a glimpse of the big heading of *The ABC of Camping* from the internet. Father John only put it up recently. But we could teach 'em some trimmings on it."

That gave further scope for speculation...

Mid-morning, Mrs Cumberland and baby Beth came to collect Greg and Bernie. Bernie, of course, had to show her the nightgown he had worn. His mother declined a demonstration — "Unless I can get a photo for your cousins Peter and John..." No way!

Mrs Lawson invited Mr & Mrs Cumberland for a proper visit on the coming Sunday afternoon.

After fond farewells and 'thank you', she left with Greg and Bernie. There followed a very easy Friday morning's tutoring, just lightweight revision.

However, this gave Jack time to calculate battery-energy and boy-energy on Battery Boosted Bikes, and to list some limitations, advantages and disadvantages.

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After an extra early lunch, and as compensation for work in yesterday's heat, Jack, Jim and Joe were free.

Jack reminded his brothers, "This is the first chance for real exploring since last Sunday — not counting finding a way to the Cumberlands and back."

Jim objected, "Don't say it as if it didn't count."

They ignored him. "Where to?" demanded Joe.

Jack's reply was shrewd. "How about we poke around Koala Creek and explore up any side creeks — what Greg and Bernie call non-perennials. That way we might find whatever the Shy Spy Triplets are looking for. And it's real exploring as well. We'll have a swim in the pool at The Thunderfall."

"Yeah," agreed Jim. "Besides, those Triplets'll be stuck at home, coming back to life after yesterday."

They set out by way of Cubby's Canyon, refilled the barrel in Cubby's Cave from Greg and Bernie's usage yesterday, and entered the visit in the Log Book.

Tramping down the gorge of Koala Creek, they kept a sharp eye open for side creeks, lest they be as hidden as Cubby's Canyon. They kept to the left bank all the way, even when the going was rough, where most walkers would have crossed to the other side.

They found nothing until they got to Koala Creek's great leap over The Thunderfall. It was to Jim's credit he spotted a narrow opening hedged with scrub.

Jack grinned and shook his head. "We missed that cleft last time — the waterfall must've distracted us. But it's so skinny. It's hardly worth exploring."

Joe interrupted, hissing, "SSsh!" With a quivering finger he pointed at the pool. Then, in a hoarse whisper, "Someone's there. Smell it! Smoke! See!"

From where they stood, they could not get close enough to look down — unless they merged with the blind fury of water, plunging into space and death.

They walked back upstream till they could cross on

stepping stones above the fierce flow, then crept to the top of the rocky scramble-down.

They could just hear an occasional shout or squeal, but saw no one. Again with a quivering forefinger, Joe pointed excitedly to the opposite side.

Words were unnecessary. Even without Greg and Bernie's detailed description, the Lawsons knew those clothes, all stacked up in such tidy piles.

At the bottom were boots, with the coloured ends of socks dangling. Then carefully folded blue-grey shirts and grey-shorts. On top, straw hats with a badge.

Beyond the clothes, a billy was boiling on a fire, and behind it, an open knapsack with something bright yellow just peeping out of one of the pockets.

Then three boy-torpedoes, previously out of sight close in to the waterfall, speared across the pool.

Jack, Jim and Joe grinned. Brick-red necks, arms and legs on all-white bodies.

Jim hissed, "Burnt to blazes!"

"You needn't whisper," Jack assured him. "They'd never hear you even if you yelled your lungs out."

The pool had revived the Shy Spy Triplets — but not enough to explore side creeks. Future searchings could jolly well wait, though revival of mind and body made them keen for later on, 'some other day'.

Unlike the Lawsons, the SST usually 'stayed bush' till nearly dark. Not today: not after yesterday's near disaster. Obedience ordered otherwise. Today's 'take it easy' picnic must meet the Dollerman van at Gunta-wang level crossing at five o'clock.

The white water of the Falls made that 'white noise' loved by spies. It hid all talk from both sets of spies.

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As the swimmers turned back towards the waterfall,

Jack, Jim and Joe ducked low.

"*They* won't want us to go swimming with them anymore than they did with Greg and Bernie," said Jack, "and we can't get past unseen, so let's explore Jim's cleft." He beckoned Jim and Joe upstream to the safe crossing. "Joe, set the pace. Watch for snakes."

Joe was only too willing. "Yo ho yep yes, Jack."

The thunder of the Falls faded away. Once more they were alone with silence. Between the sheer-downs, the cleft was choked with scrubby eucalypts struggling for life on patches of hungry soil. They had to skippety-hop on slippery round rocks all covered with moss yet seemingly without a trickle of water.

Then, at a wide spread of a flat slippery rock, the cleft began to open out. There were real trees with white or bluish trunks and great limbs high up and leafy crowns, with grass and scrub beneath. Wow!

This forest stood in a vast open valley. Now they could see openings in the greenery, and beyond and towering yet higher, the cliffs and the sky. Sunlight shone through. Who could have guessed it?

Surprisingly, there was now a proper gurgling creek. Jim puzzled, "Where's that come from?"

Jack was shrewder. "The question is, where's it go to? It must dive underground."

"Yowee!" cried Jim. "Cubby's Canyon was only a cleft the whole way, but this is a proper valley!"

At first, sweet music from many birds greeted them. It was shattered by a cacophony from the guardian cockatoos. The sweet music switched to squawks of alarm. Flocks of birds swept aloft and headed for the safety of the heights.

Close by was an enormous gum, with a clean white trunk running up and up, with candle-bark drooling off

in great lengths from the heights. Its lowest branches were seemingly as high as the lofty tops of lesser trees. It stood like a sentinel. The boys gaped in admiration.

Jack grinned and reminded them of what Dad would have said: "You can't hug that one!"

Widely spaced, as befitting their aristocratic dignity, rose lesser giants. By normal standards they were magnificently tall — stately mountain blue gums, iron barks and so on, all eucalypts. This forest seemed to stretch on endlessly, till finally fenced-in by high cliffs in the middle distance.

Here there was no undergrowth, only lush lawn, mown short by kangaroos. Alerted by the birds, six man-size roos loped off silently as the boys approached.

"How on earth did they get in here?" puzzled Jim.

"No pad marks the way we came," observed Jack.

Jim drew a conclusion. "There must be another way in and out. And of course, they don't leave tracks with those soft pads on their feet."

Jack admitted it. "They don't make a sound."

"That's kangas," declared Joe proudly, their self-appointed proprietor. He went on, "This lawn's just like the village green at Boxwatch." Then with regret, "Except no swings or razzle-dazzles or slippery-dips."

"Or ice-cream shops," quipped Jim.

They walked on several hundred metres. A barrier of rock two metres high barred the way. At its middle, water lapped over and trickled down.

They climbed it eagerly. And behold! a sizeable pool. The boys gasped in delight, in wonderment. They had seen nothing like this in their experiences of the Wild Bush Mountains. A pool, and in such a setting! They were hushed with awe.

Joe broke the silence. "Thank Heaven! *Now* we



A SIZEABLE POOL

can swim." For him, pools meant swimming, and were of far greater interest than any old rocks or trees.

They made their way around the pool to the far right side. Here the grassy sward ended, and lesser trees and scrub began, from which flowed two smaller rivulets. Clearly, the soil was different.

First they must light a fire for drying at. There was no sign of any former fireplace. Jack and Jim returned to the top of the rocky wall to fetch shards of dry rock to cage a fire. Jack reckoned, "This rock's a bit like sandstone, but it's harder and glassy smooth."

They carried two each to where Joe was raking up the leaves and twigs, partly as kindling and partly against bushfires. They set three slabs on edge, with the fourth set flat in front. [Picture p. 467.]

Joe claimed the right to light the fire.

Once the billy was on, they went swimming.

The water was mainly a bit over a metre deep. It was just so refreshing. And not surprisingly, the rocky bottom had lots of sticks and leaves — and mud.

You had a choice: float or swim — or wade around with the enjoyment of squelchy mud between the toes. Whichever — mere mud never worried the Lawsons.

They got ashore and stood on tussocks to wipe their muddy feet. As usual, they dried at the fire's radiant heat and hot air, plus a bit of a mop over with the flappy ends of shorts, shirts and socks.

They dressed at once and brewed a celebration cuppa, whose taste had all the added flavour of a paradise on earth.

Chapter 12

Jacob's Ladder

JIM CHUCKLED as he 'chewed' his tea. "From the very first time we saw the Shy Spy Triplets, we reckoned they had a uniform." He forgot their argument over it. "Now we've seen what the Cumberlands told us. And they *do* stack their clothes really tidy — even to go swimming — it's a bit sissy, like girls."

Jack agreed in part: "Yes, our heaps are higgie-dee-piggie-dee. But our clothesline's healthier cos it let's the air flow through." He also partly disagreed: "But there's nothing sissy about the Triplets — they're just like good soldiers, tidy and tough."

Joe capped this: "Cumberlands are even cleverer. They showed us on Wednesday. Make coat hangers to air sweaty clothes. We should do that, too."

Jim ignored him. "Whatever school those Shy Spies go to must be mighty refined — like us home-schoolers — much more than that boy Andy at Dad's high school. I'll bet *he's* not as tidy as the Triplets."

Jack gave a glimmer of a grin. "Well, nor are we."

Jim changed the subject. "What'll we call it here?"

Joe was first off the mark. "*Heaven on Earth.*"

"Not quite, little boy!" Jack's glimmer smile now grew to his rarer big grin. He pointed. "A leech! sucking on *my* left calf — and a bull-ant! crawling up *your* right boot."

After pest disposal, Jim suggested, "*Paradisum* — it's Latin for the Paradise of Pleasure, the Garden of Eden, where the pests got pestiferous after Adam ate the apple."

Joe was eager to impress. "This garden's lots of

trees. Does one of 'em count as The Tree of Life and another The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?"

This made Jim think of evil. He gave a groan. "OOooh! I've just had an awful thought." The others waited. "Suppose those Shy Spies found all these trees — they might sell their information to a sawmill."

Jack sighed. "Then best they don't find the way in to *Paradisum*. So they mustn't see us coming out the Narrow Way". Jim duly noted this further name for his map. "Best we go home a different way: the top end of this valley's sure to have an easy exit."

Jim doused the fire, dismantled the fire place and left the blackened sides of rocks facing down. "The Triplets'll never know we've been here," he chortled.

Jack was reflective, almost sly. "If they *do* get in, it'd be better if they knew we'd beat 'em to it, and it's only on loan to them, and not theirs at all."

His brothers felt he needed correction. Together they chanted, "And it's not ours either."

They chose the left and larger rivulet, and set off uphill through what was normal mountain bush. At a higher fork, they chose left again, for it had more water. As the slope steepened, they plodded more slowly.

"Low-range gears, everybody," urged Jack.

Then further progress was blocked by a seemingly impassable barrier of enormously high cliff.

Jim approved. "Good! It'd've blocked the old timber-getters getting in to log the big stuff."

Jack relapsed into his normal mild pessimism. "Good? It's blocking us getting out."

Joe was excited. He pointed eagerly at a ragged crack in the cliff out of which the water flowed. "Where's that come from?"

Jack grunted. "For a guess, I'd say it comes under-

ground from our swamp. There's probably a smaller crack for the other rivulet, too. But never mind that: hunt for a way up — if there is one."

They hunted further left, then right. Hopeless?

In desperation, Jim swung himself up via a few hand-grips, mere stubby bits of tree roots poking out of cracks — up a three metre cliff and onto a narrow ledge.

The others followed gladly. Hope springs eternal...

The toeholds, unlike a ladder with level rungs, were terrible for booted feet. These roots sloped all ways, mainly up and down, and all too often, a boy slipped, and was left dangling by his arms.

What is more, the ledge seemed a dead end. They were about to climb down when Jim spotted, at its far left end, a very narrow chimney. But its steep ramp was paved with loose stones — totally uninviting, and even dangerous.

Jack put Joe in front and himself last. Hope died again when the chimney seemed about to fizzle out.

Yet at the last moment, it kinked to the right. Here, in a deep trough with rock walls, the boys found they could keep going, ever upwards. The wall on the left was a lofty cliff, but on the right quite low. They peered over. An awful drop showed how high they had climbed already. Hopes soared again.

The trough ended at another ledge which switched back to the left nearly a full circle, and still sloped up. From below, all this had been hidden from their sight.

Ahead, the ledge seemed to end. They were about to give up and climb back down. Nevertheless, having come so far, they followed it to the last gasp.

At its end, it slimmed into nothing and merged with the cliff above. Beneath was nothing but an airy void.

"Cheated by the Cliffs of a Fatal Abyss," chortled

cheery Jim, "gazing into the Depths of Death."

No matter how bad the prospect, Jim seemed able to put a good complexion on it. He was so optimistic. His humour even heartened pessimistic Jack.

They took the last possible step on the ledge.

And lo! another reprieve. Here it turned right into a new chimney, short, straight, and very, very steep.

The hazard was the deadly drop awaiting anyone who slipped. He would do nothing but slide and on down the big plunge...

"Press your hands against the sides," ordered Jack. "Then you're jammed in and can't slip."

Underfoot, loose stones rolled treacherously. Again, Jack put himself last, ready to dodge any rolling rocks or to block the way of any slithering brother.

This chimney ended in a final surprise, a sinister looking tunnel. It too was a steeply sloping ramp, but roofed over by fallen rocks jammed solid.

It was just high and wide enough for a full grown man. Jack's knapsack sometimes scraped the sides.

A jumble of rocks and scrub hid whatever lay beyond the top.

Joe first, they scrambled forth from an opening like a manhole.

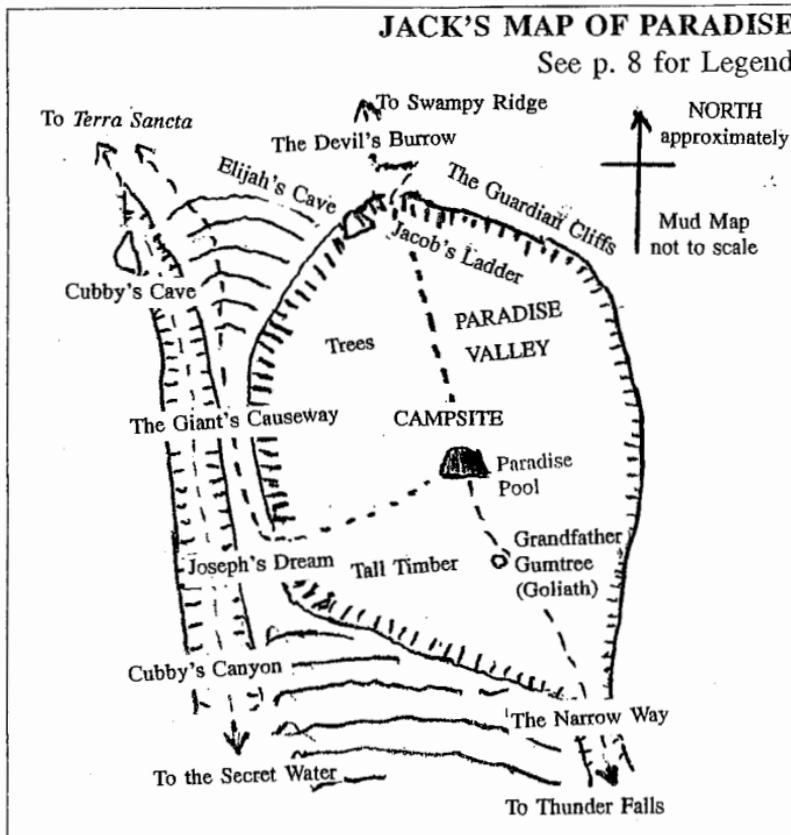
Jim was next. "Scrub!" he whooped. "You beauty! at last: a welcome bit of the old grey-green low-grade scrub."

Jack surfaced last. "You beauty all right! It's a shallow valley where a ridge top splits in two. It slopes up steeply, just what we wanted." He chortled, "Wow! We've done it. We're up! We've beat the cliff."

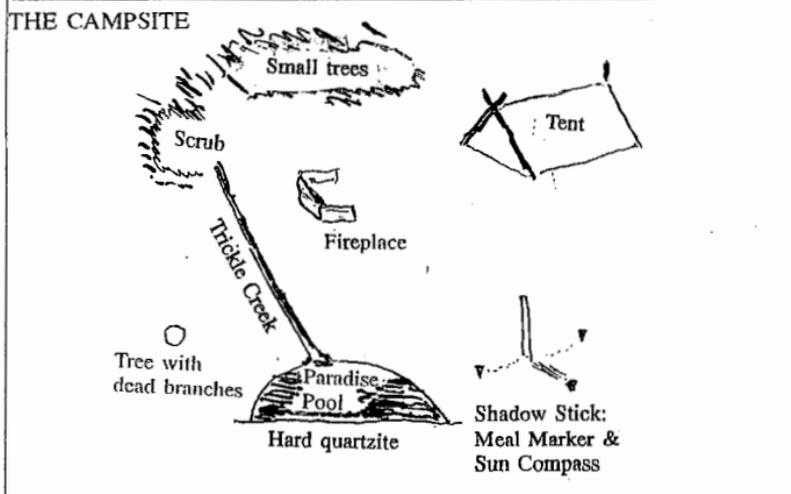
They paused to look back. The floor of the valley was wholly hidden. Tree tops obscured the ground below. Even smoke from a small fire would be lost in

JACK'S MAP OF PARADISE

See p. 8 for Legend



THE CAMPSITE



all that foliage. At the most, you would sniff it. Even if the smoke were visible, it might be from anywhere — unless one knew that distant smoke lacks smell.

From below, there had been no hint of a way up. Now from on top, there was not a hint of a way down. No one would even guess that their basin-crater was there. And even if they did, the guardian cliffs barred the way to *Paradisum*.

For once, Jack tried a bit of naming. “*The Secret Stairs* — how’s that for this way out of Paradise?”

Joe was happy with this: “The Narrow Way at the bottom, The Secret Stairs at the top. In between, The Paradise of Pleasure.”

Jim disagreed. “The greatest stairs in history was Jacob’s Ladder.” Seemingly, as an afterthought, he added, “and Jacob is just Hebrew for Jim, that’s me.”

Jack agreed. “Okay, *Jacob’s Ladder*, cos we didn’t let you name the ladder at Little Bogie after yourself.”

The trees grew grander and the scrub more puny as they plodded onwards, ever upwards. At long last it levelled and they burst into a well-known clearing...

“Why, this is where we were getting wood when we first saw the Spies,” cried Jim.

“When they ran away from us last Monday,” Jack reminded them. But I bet they couldn’t get down that cliff: they would have gone only far enough to escape from us. That’s when they came back.”

“So they’ve never found *Paradisum*,” chortled Joe.

“Will we dash down The Tumbledown and fetch some passion fruit?” suggested Jim. “Just to show the visitors what the bush has to offer.”

At this, Jack grinned. “We can show ’em that tomorrow.” Something pleased him even more. “At least, it’s an easy road now from here to home, to the



JACOB'S LADDER

family jobs and the visitors.”

That raised a new topic.

“What are we going to *do* to them?” That was Jim, thinking of mischief.

Jack chided him “Mick, Rick and Phil — they’re not all grumps and grizzles like Simon and Dominic were before we *fixed* ’em with The Bush. We don’t have to *do* anything to them.”

Jim pondered. “Phil’s a mini-moaner, says he’s bored, and Mick’s a bit of a bossy boots.”

“Okay,” said Jack, “And Rick’s a bit dirty minded and they’re all sniggerers. We could wash their mouths out with soap. But Dad’s trick’s better, the trick he does on us: just wear ’em out.”

This puzzled Joe. “I can’t see how that helps.”

Jack grinned. “It takes their minds off the crooked stuff from Boxwatch — like Mum says, all that Box Watching and other bad companions.”

Joe took a moment to digest the pun, “Oh, TV.”

So Jim agreed. “Okay, we’ll make ’em welcome and carry on as usual, just do the things we always do.”

Jack summed up. “And we’ll get to Mount Zodiac.”

* * * *

Jack, Jim and Joe were in such fine trim they half-trotted, half-strode all the way to *Terra Sancta*, including a vault over the slip-rails.

They burst into the kitchen and found Nanna making bread-and-butter pudding and Mum feeding baby Brigid.

Jim looked at the clock and wrote on the white board, ‘Early home safe and sound at 1600’.

“Bursting in and bursting with news,” was Mum’s shrewd comment as they bent down to be kissed. “Have a cuppa?”

Jack grinned goodwill. "Thank 'ee and welcome. We'll tell our news now, cos at the convivium we want to keep some things secret from the visitors."

They told of their finding a secret valley, and its various names, New Eden, Paradise, a Paradise of Pleasure, *Paradisum*.

"It's even got its own swimming pool," boasted Joe, "and I led the way in."

Not to be outdone, Jim put Joe in his place. "And you remember, it was Jack who put you in front."

Then he staked his own claim to fame. "And it was me who found the way out, Jacob's Ladder."

Nanna sighed. Jacob's Ladder sounded perilous. However, all she said was, "It makes me wish I was a few years younger. I'd love to visit all your wonders."

Mum smiled patiently. "Next best thing to going there is hearing about it, and from enthusiasts."

The boys gobbled their biscuits, and the hot tea tanned their leathery throats even more.

Jim mumbled, "We're in a hurry."

Mum smiled reproof. "You've food in your mouth."

"Got yer!" chortled Jim. "So have you!"

With bulging cheeks and an impudent grin, he hissed at his brothers, loud enough for Mum and Nanna, "I waited till *she* had a gobful, to catch her out."

Mum and Nanna's looks were expressive.

But it was one of those situations hard to deal with, for even a reproof for being cheeky did not seem fair.

They raced into their jobs, had their showers, got back into their clothes, and wrote up their log books.

Their write-up of the glories of *Paradisum* rather eclipsed their entries on the Triplets.

For his part, Jack caught up on Thursday's missing entry by doubling up with today's:-

The Shy Spy Triplets

- electric bikes Mon.-Wed via Cumberland's Lane;
- electric bikes Thu. and Fri. via Guntawang;
- tidy school uniforms: so a strict school in town;

Map of *Paradisum* and front view of The Secret Stairs.

Jim copied Jack's map of Paradise and Jacob's Ladder, transcribed the texts of Genesis 2:8 and 28:12.

Also, he wrote a poem on the Triplets:-

Shy Spies from the east
 Were beasts waiting to feast,
 At least on Jack, Jim and Joe.
 Next time from the west
 Still with zest but no jest
 A sun test laid them low.
 Amusing their guests
 These shy pests were best
 When Bernie and Greg gave 'em tea.

Jack smirked at Jim. "Good old Kanga."

Jim puzzled, "What's the dog got to do with it?"

Jack opened and shut the fingers and thumb of one hand like a dog barking, and with the other hand waved a finger like a dog's tail. "I thought Kanga wrote it — it's high grade doggerel."

Jim looked a little annoyed. Jack hastened to soothe his ruffled feathers, first with a kindly smile, then with, "You're doggerel's almost down to my standard."

And Joe did stick-figures climbing Jacob's Ladder, their cliff path out of *Paradisum*.

Just as Jack had teased Jim, Jim now teased Joe. "Why put bull ants in your picture?"

Joe's riposte was perfect. "Because they're just what *you* looked like when you crawled up the worst bits on your paws and trotters."

Was that calling names? Jack held his peace.

Chapter 13

More Boys from Boxwatch

ARASPING TOOT from the newly repaired Land Rover was followed by a dutiful 'Woof-woof' from Kanga. Boys and girls raced out to welcome Dad and the visitors.

Kanga sniffed each of the new arrivals and gave them his clearance. He was a dog of discernment.

That morning, Jim had pleaded for the five oldest to walk in and meet the visitors' train. But Dad had said, "There'd be no way to fit you five, plus five visitors, in the Rover. So who'd walk back? Not the visitors... Besides, you're needed here to get things ready." Actually, Dad had other reasons. He wanted to impress on the visitors the myriad jobs and duties shared in a big family, and to save Mum from the fuss the littlies would make if she took the van in without *them*.

That morning, Dad had, in his usual casual manner, mentioned to Jack, "While you've got the visitors here, best not drive or use axes." So Jack could only look longingly at their newly reborn work-horse. It would be a trial to wait till Monday... In the outcome, however, there was so much to do, and so much happiness in doing it, it didn't matter at all.

Mick, Rick and Phil had a knapsack each, while Jill, Mick's big sister and her friend Jane, had knapsacks *and* suitcases.

Mick was apologetic. "They're girls..."

The five visitors from Boxwatch were cheerful boys and girls, and old friends, which is always a good start.

They contrasted with last Friday's arrivals, Simon, Dominic and Patricia. For as long as the Lawsons

could remember, these cousins from Lahdidar had been immersed in prickliness and 'the grumps'. However, kinship had required that they be invited first.

Today's visitors rejoiced to see the Lawsons again. Since Jack and Jim left Boxwatch, Mick particularly had been missing them — they were so alive.

Jack and Jim greeted them warmly. Their simple aim was to keep the visitors happy. The twins, however, aimed at something more, to give them 'added value'. As for Joe, he was too young to plan thing much at all.

Sox, Tilly's kitten, came out to inspect the visitors by smoodging up against their ankles.

Introductions to Mum were unnecessary — she too knew them well. She simply asked, "Are the Boxwatch pilgrims hungry enough to eat right away?"

Yes, the Boxwatchers were! All five! Ravenous!

The meal was ready to serve, so the visitors washed their hands and came to the table at once.

Dad led the Grace before Meals. The twins served out at the side bench. Jack, Jim and Joe delivered the hot plates with the fish cakes, boiled carrot, steamed spinach and lots of chipped potatoes — enough for second helpings. Salt and tomato sauce were on the table. Dessert was bread-and-butter pudding and mugs of tea. Jack noted with approval that the visiting boys drank tea — they'd need to, against the dehydration.

The convivium began with everyone happily tucking in and the reporting briefer than usual.

Dad reported seeing the Shy Spy Triplets, that very afternoon, riding their Battery Boosted Bikes over the railway level crossing near Guntawang Railway Station.

This was important news for his sons. Yet it meant nothing to the visitors, so Dad prompted Jack to give a summary so far. After all, it might affect their weekend

activities, not only the boys, but also the girls if they went to Little Bogie for a swim.

Jack described their varied encounters with the three strangers since Monday. He ticked off items on his fingers — and ran out of fingers:

- Joe called them triplets for all wearing the same clothes.
- They always run away — guilty? shy? secretive?
- They're good 'bushies' at finding their way around.
- Boot prints hint that two could be brothers, plus a friend.
- At the Secret Water, Greg & Bernie couldn't get 'em to talk.
- They ride very expensive electric bicycles — pots of money.
- What are they looking for on our place? or near it?
- Seems to be something to do with trees. Or birds?
- But what? How can we find out?
- Vigilance! to catch 'em in the act, and/or make 'em talk!
- Perhaps overhearing their plans?

When Jack was finished, Jim smiled, and held up two little fingers: "I've just thought of a twelfth:-"

- They might be looking for caves with Log Books.

Jack did not remind him that his earlier pet idea had been the SST were hoping to make money from timber.

Dad had more to add. "There's a van well-known in Galway Crags bearing the name ERNIE DOLLERMAN. He's an important figure in the town. Well, it was he who picked up the Shy Spy Triplets and their bikes this afternoon at Guntawang. They must be his sons."

Dad had further juicy details. "Several times I've seen those boys in Galway Crags, arriving at the Academy of Bible Christians. At that school, any bush trip counts as an official school excursion. That's why you've seen them in straw boater hats with the school badge, well-ironed blue-grey shirts and grey-shorts — or at least they start out with them well-ironed — long socks with tops in bands of school colours, green, gold, red and blue, and polished boots — of course." Jim

nudged Jack. Trust Dad for that last detail!

Jack, Jim and Joe knew not to interrupt Dad, but their eyes met. Without realizing it, they were shaking their heads. Dad had been sitting on vital information, facts they 'needed to know' — and would have known, if he had not brushed aside the reports they had *tried* to give him of their sightings last Monday.

Jack pondered aloud. "Some of us've seen those Shy Spy Triplets every day this week. They're always wearing the same pants and shirts, but newly washed and pressed. So they must have at least two sets of everything, and their mother keeps on turning them out looking smart. It must be a very swank school."

Colleen added, "I saw them coming out of the bush late yesterday afternoon. They looked bedraggled. But it was the same uniform, Dad, just as you describe it. And I can't work out how on earth they keep those straw boater hats so clean." And no one else could, either!

Colleen had a further thought. "Those school colours you mentioned, Dad. Each of their electric bikes had all four colours: green, gold, red and blue."

Dad went on, "Their Academy of Bible Christians is a very strict school. And it's determined to make a good impression in Galway Craggs. They're known in the town for courtesy, like raising their boaters to thank drivers who stop for them at pedestrian crossings, and for their good manners in shops."

Mrs Lawson beamed. "That's so good to hear about our Separated Brethren." Then she demurred slightly, "But it's said they're rather isolationist."

"No more than us homeschoolers, my dear," her husband replied. "And they keep Sunday morning very strictly for church-going, but allow sport and hobbies and social get-togethers on Sunday afternoons."



ERNIE DOLLERMAN PICKED UP THE SPIES AND BIKES

"Which means," Jack put in, "that we might expect to see them in the bush tomorrow and on Sunday arvo."

Dad's final tidbit particularly interested Mum and Nanna: "Their academy's something like the Guntawang Academy of 1900. Remember what I read out from the old Log Book? Morning school's for brains, afternoons for bodies and outdoors, and they encourage family evenings at home for the schooling of the heart. There's no homework, though some of them have to write journals, but they're not on school subjects."

All this made the Lawson boys realize that they had a deal of kinship with the Shy Spy Triplets.

* * * *

Next came the family night prayers.

The Lawson boys and girls were accustomed to this daily activity. However, Jack and Jim soon realized it was not so with their visitors.

After this, the littlies were bathed and put to bed.

At the washing up, Micky's big sister, Jill, was delighted when the twins led the singing and the boys joined in. She enthused, "It's much cheerier than a dish-washer."

Finally, Jack, Jim and Joe were free to show Mick, Rick and Phil the primitive facilities, such as the boys' deep pit latrine and the showers.

It was in the boys' bath room that Phil bleated his first protest. "But it's a horrible old *laundry*."

Jack explained patiently, "It started as a laundry *and* the boys' bathroom for the boarding school."

Jim grinned. "You fill a sprinkler bucket at the copper, hang it up on a hook, and turn it on."

Jack added, "And never let the copper run dry."

"Only two buckets each," Joe warned them. "One to soap with, other for rinsing."

Jack handed out dispensations: "Visitors can have extra buckets, and can hang a bucket in the cubicle or in the screened bath tub if you want to."

The visitors gave eloquent gulps but said nothing.

In the boys' bedroom, with its three double-decker bunks, Jack suggested, "You might like to do what we do. Wear towels to the bathroom and save getting clothes or 'jamas wet."

Jim added, "We've showered already."

The visitors nodded. They girded on towels and the Lawsons changed into pyjamas. Rick gave a low suggestive snigger, echoed by Mick and Phil.

Jim was half-expecting it. He glanced at Jack. "The pure mountain air'll soon clean up their thinking."

Jack was blunter. "Yeah, city air's sure polluted."

The visitors had the grace to blush and scurried off.

But even as Jack spoke, A GRAND PLOT began to dawn on him for that very evening. He'd fix 'em!"

Then the Lawsons studied their map and to plan the really tough expedition to Mount Zodiac.

They knew that the twins aimed to take Jill and Jane for a picnic in the morning, and a swim at Little Bogie in the afternoon. This plan suited the Bush Boy Explorers, who planned to be far away in new country, 'where no man had ever trod'.

Jack suggested, "Let's race up the ridge that ends on the south side opposite Big Bogie. Once we're in the high country, we can get our bearings to head straight for Mount Zodiac — and still get home in time for the jobs." His brothers nodded approvingly.

When the visitors returned from the bathroom, they looked at the Lawsons and burst out laughing.

Mick grinned gleefully at Jack. "It's like nothing on earth, but it works!"

Rick related triumphantly, "We didn't need extra water and we didn't burn the bottom out of the copper."

Phil chortled, "My Mum'd chuck a mental."

Jim smiled sweetly. "Well, this ain't Lahdidah or Boxwatch, and no place to be fussy."

Once they had got their pyjamas on, Jack showed them the home-made map. "It's only roughly to scale and compass directions are not exact."

However, bush geography was so much gobble-dey-gook to the city boys — or 'city slickers' as Joe called them behind their backs.

Jim announced breezily, "Tonight's early bed for a big bush day tomorrow. We're doing some hard walking along very scrubby ridges, up 'em and down 'em."

In a special cheery burst, Jack assured them, "And if we manage to get back from where we've never been before, we'll plunge into a cool pool in Koala Creek."

With this, the visitors were happy, except for unknown country and that mention of *plunging in*.

Rick asked anxiously, "Are you going to *initiate* us tomorrow — like you did your cousins?"

Jack half-smiled. "What d'yer mean, Rick?"

Rick blushed. "Well, you know, chuck us in?" Poor Rick had no way of knowing if it were only a tease.

The Lawsons roared with laughter. They had not reckoned with the eagerness a new group of visitors would listen to those before them. They would be ready to believe almost anything.

Mick and Phil also looked uneasy. What might Jack, Jim and Joe be going to *do* to them...

It came out later that Mick's Dad, Mr Mullins, had told the three visitors that the Bush Boy Explorers might spring some rough surprises. He had also hinted at Mr Lawson's peculiar mixture of strict-and-easy discipline,

and that, "I told Mr Lawson, 'If they need walloping, go right ahead' — so you boys watch out. And whatever Jack tells you to do, you do it."

Yet there is no anxiety like unknown uncertainty.

However, on Friday night, Jack knew nothing of this. Rather, he had to choke off laughing to gasp a reply to Rick: "What rot!"

In imitation of Joe, Jim chortled, "Yo ho nope no." Then reassuringly, "It was our Uncle Wal who told us stories about chucking in, what the city boy scouts did in the old days, chucking new boys in the creeks, first with their clothes on, then off. But *we* don't do that sort of thing — *we* think it's cruel."

Joe contradicted him. "Yo ho nope no yourself, Jim." And to the visitors: "Jack an' Jim *did* chuck me in." And with an air of bravado, "It didn't worry me."

Jack scoffed, "Aw Joe, tell the truth! That was quite different and *you* know it. We weren't *initiating* you. Tell 'em the truth — you ran into the water because you wanted to, *and* then you splashed us because you wanted to — when we still had our clothes on." He turned to Mick, Rick and Phil, "*We* would only chuck in boys if they were really 'asked for it' — like cheeky Joe did."

Jim smirked. "Drunks get things garbled. So to folk on the TV plug-in-drug." He didn't insult them explaining the pun on Boxwatch, but went on, "When our cousins came, *we* didn't do a single thing to them. They did it to each other." He chuckled at the memory. "*They* pushed each other in, clothes, boots and all."

His rubbery conscience did not prompt him to admit that, earlier on, he and Jack *had* planned to chuck the grumpy Coxes in the creek but didn't have to. When Simon got scared stiff on the ladder, and with both of

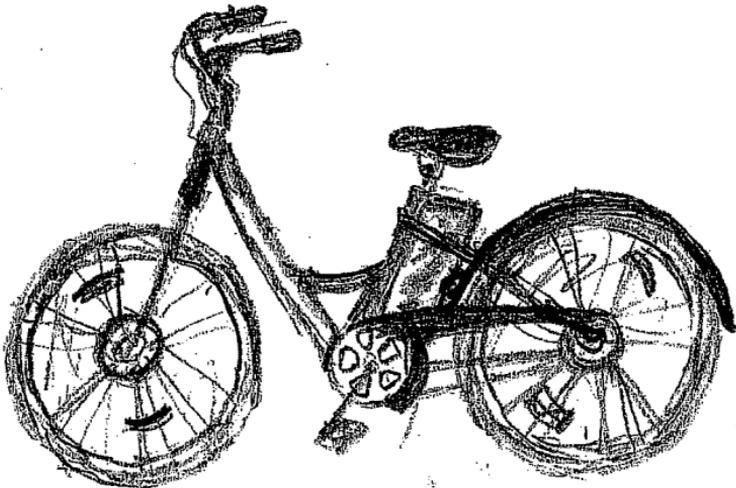
them scared of the bush, they didn't need to.

However, Joe could not resist some teasing. "Of course, if you really want to be chucked in..."

Jim glared at Joe and then poured on soothing reassurance. "So there you are, Rick. And you too Mick and Phil. You've got nothing to worry about and we're looking forward to the company of cheerful pals like you, and tough enough for the Mighty Bush."

Jack summed up. "Really, the only things we *did* with them were things we do to each other. Or they copied what we do, and you can, too, if you want to. But we won't try to make you."

However, his own conscience poked a little protest, in view of his GRAND PLOT brainwave.



BATTERY BOOSTED BICYCLE

Chapter 14

Double Mopoke

THE VISITING BOYS were longing for some mischief. They had heard from the Lawsons' cousins Simon and Dominic of the pillow fight last week, and Mick demanded a repeat, and at once.

Jack explained patiently, "Dad told me to remind you" — he included his brothers in a sweeping glance — "pillow fighting boys will be 'severely dealt with'."

Jim nodded regretfully. "It's Old Ironbark's lingo for the old-fashioned treatment."

Joe scoffed, "He always says that, but last week we got away with it."

"It was a close thing," Jack reminded him, "and I think he knew. He was letting us off, just that once."

Phil favoured caution. He glanced at Mick and Rick. "If pillow fighters get whacked, we can't risk it."

Rick felt this needed explanation. "Two nights ago, me an' Phil stayed the night at Mick's place — practice for being away from home and for coming here. Well, at dinner we was a sorta bit rude an' cheeky to his Mum, but his Dad didn't do a thing, and we got worse nearer bedtime, because of no TV that night."

"So it'd be like your place," explained Phil.

Mick chimed in. "We put on pyjamas and Rick started a pillow fight. Our clothes got a bit scattered and we skittled the curtains. I passed a football to Phil; he passed it to Rick; Rick kicked it at me, straight into the window, THUD, CRASH, CRACK! — the glass got starred all over. And then I grabbed the ball and kicked it at Rick, but it hit the ceiling and put out the light — shook its vitals to bits, but didn't smash the globe."

The Lawsons grinned impishly, almost as if they'd been in it — but were dismayed at the outcome...

Phil took up the story. "His Dad and Mum raced in, roarin' an' squawkin', but it was too dark to see the damaged window. His Mum went off her brain and told Mick's Dad we'd wrecked the room and he'd have to give us a good lesson and really make us feel it."

"Before that," explained Mick, "*she* 'd never let Dad wallop me. But now, Dad looked grim, and told us, 'As soon as I'm back with a spare light globe'... And they stumped off, grouchin', so things looked bad."

Only later did Jack remind Jim what their cousins had once declared, "Mick's mother's 'an old frostbite'."

But for now... Phil grinned. "We padded our pyjamas like you would've — they were summer ones."

Rick took up the story. "His Dad came back with a candle cos his Mum couldn't find a spare globe. Nor could she find a strap or a feather duster. That made him worse annoyed, and our padded pants most of all."

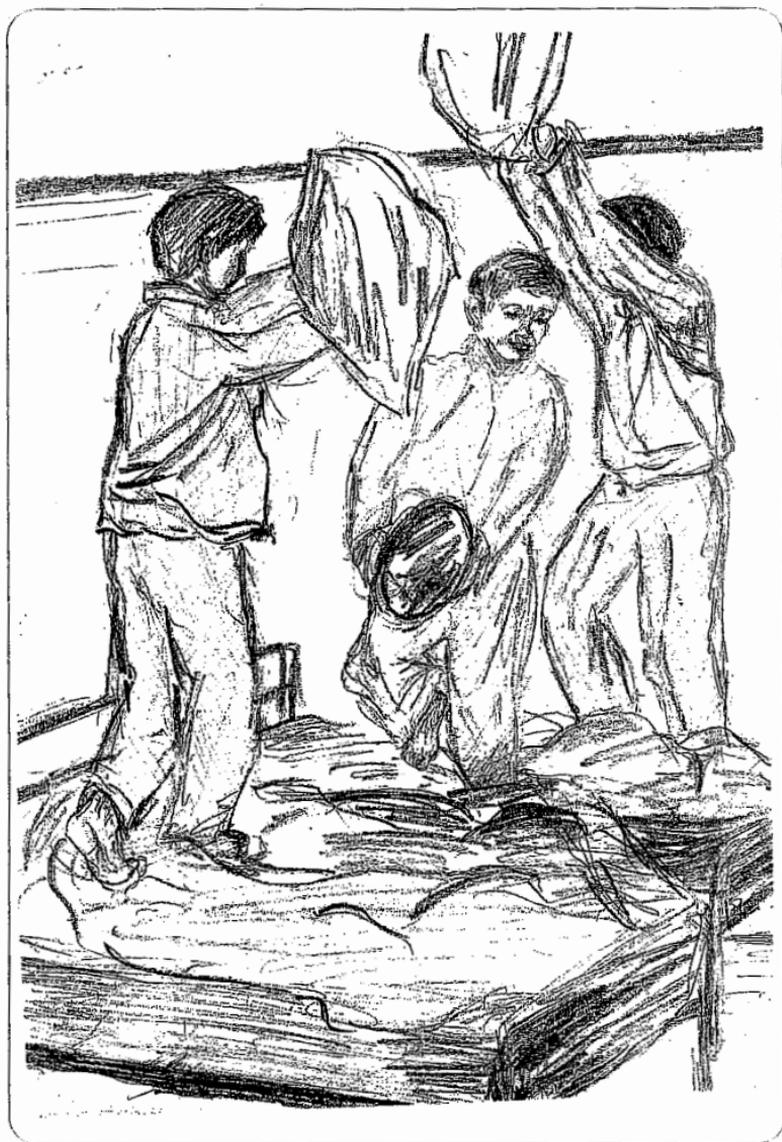
Mick was proud of his Dad's performance. "He did us by candlelight... Over his knee, without any padding, SMACK-BANG! wow! yow! ouch! ooh!"

Rick grinned. "I was last, but there was no waitin', cos he was like a whirlwind." Then sadly, "I'd rather get spanked than have my Mum naggin' an' jawin'."

"Me too," added Mick. "It was all over so quick — though we kept on howling an' yelpin' cos it stinged and stinged and kept on stinging!"

Jim told them, "Our Dad always jaws a bit before it, to make us feel bad about what we'd done, and more afterwards, to make us start to feel better."

Phil resumed, "At breakfast, we was so good, Mick's Mum said she'd changed her mind and spanking was good for us and next time she'd do it herself..."



"I GRABBED THE BALL AND KICKED IT"

The Lawsons could picture both the evening and morning. They grinned, though not without sympathy for boys in distress getting a well-deserved comeuppance.

Joe chortled. "One of our old *Boy's Own Paper* has a cartoon of a boy, and his Dad with a whacking stick. The caption has Dad saying, 'Well, son, this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.' And the son replying, 'Well, Dad, let Mum do it and it won't hurt either of us.'"

The cartoon and the visitors' vivid account strengthened their boyhood bonds. And after that no one wanted to risk it with Mr Lawson.

Alas! this new start for a happy weekend was soon sullied. Such friends... but they had others even worse.

Jack declared, "Better say our prayers and get to bed" and the Lawsons knelt for their 'pyjama prayers'.

Softly and insultingly, the visitors sniggered. In this matter, they were worse than Jack had thought. Maybe they should not have invited them?

Rick heaved a pillow at Jack. He caught it but did not throw it back. Indeed, he knelt on it!

Then the Lawsons half-turned and gave a *look* which blended reproach, appeal and even command.

No more was said. If the visitors said any praying at all, they did it in bed.

Jack stood at the door to turn out the light. Across the dark room, he called, "I've just got an idea that I've gotta ask Dad about." HIS GRAND PLOT had distracted his prayers — something to fix the sniggerers.

Jim and Joe assured the visitors Jack would not do.

In the kitchen, Jack found Dad, Mum, Nanna, Colleen and Kathleen, playing cards and yarnning.

They paused to listen to Jack.

Jack appealed to Dad. "I can't explain just now,

but for tonight, could we please have six apples and six bits of cake for a twilight pretend midnight feast?"

An incredible request! Fancy asking permission — it was only fun if forbidden...

But it was Jack's ploy to get the food — how else?

Dad glanced at Mum and sensed she would say 'no'. Both were permissive, but parents with hidden strengths, such as never disagree in front of the children. Dad got in first. "A bit rummy — you really need your sleep, but okay, as long as it's outside and at once."

"Thanks, Dad. I'll tell you about it in the morning," promised Jack. His cheeky grin was pleasantly out of character with his usual mild gloom.

After he went out, Dad said, "Serves me right! I've just given permission for some mischief or other."

The oldies and the twins continued their cards.

Jack hurried back to the bedroom. He switched on the light. "Look!" He brandished the apples and cake. "This is part of a Big Surprise. Food for a midnight feast. But it's gotta be outside and before midnight. Has everyone got a hanky in his 'jama jacket pocket?"

Of course they didn't, so Jack issued some from a drawer. "Good! Now quick! Get out the window!"

The visitors asked no questions. Jim opened the flyscreen and climbed out, lowering himself without any jumping noises onto the encircling verandah. He slid open the verandah window and got out onto the lawn.

Jack spoke mysteriously... "Look up! Look at the stars! *Those stars* are the start of a Big Surprise." He pointed into the afterglow of the sunset. "That brightest thing westering is the planet Venus. It's the third brightest thing in the sky."

In the mountain air, the stars and planets blazed far brighter than anything in the polluted city air of

Boxwatch. As their eyes dilated for darkness, they could almost have walked in the bush by starlight.

Jim nearly exclaimed, "So what?" but he didn't.

Jack swung round. "That bright one rising in the east is the planet Jupiter. At the moment, Sirius, the Dog Star, the brightest star in the sky, is near it. The flagship of the First Fleet was named after it."

Having puzzled his brothers and fuddled the visitors with astronomy and history, Jack started on serious business, THE GRAND PLOT. "Listen, Mick, Rick an' Phil, yous gotta wait here until you hear a double mopoke call..."

Phil interrupted him. "What's a mopoke call?"

Joe showed off his learning. "A mopoke's an owl, and its call is *honny-poo*."

Honny-poo was way beyond Jim.

But Jack worked it out. "He means onomatopoeic — a mopoke is named after the call it makes. But never mind all that. The signal sounds like" — and he drew out the long 'oh' vowels slowly and mournfully — "Mo-poke, mo-poke." It was a good imitation.

Jack grinned mischievously and prattled on. "On the first mopoke call, Rick creeps past the kitchen and *comes on his own* round to the woodheap. Now Rick, don't look at the light or it'll spoil your night vision, cos the moon doesn't rise till nearly midnight. Mick and Phil've gotta wait here." He added an after-thought, "Try not to tread in the cow pooh and one of us'll meet you at the woodheap to blindfold you with your hanky and make the Surprise even more surprising. It's just round the corner. You'll laugh like mad till you gasp for a breath when we tell you to take off the hanky. At the next double-mopoke, Phil comes along. The third time will be for Mick, and then we have the

apples and cake. Now don't mess it up: wait for your Mopoke. Sure about your hankies?" Again they nodded. "Okay. You'll never stop laughing after tonight." Then, to his brothers, "Come and help me get The Surprise ready."

They knew better than to question him in front of Mick, Rick and Phil. Also, Jack insisted on complete silence as they glided like spooks past the kitchen.

He led them to the back of the old laundry, out of sight of the house. He said sternly. "Now don't laugh, or you'll muck it up," and he whispered the details.

Their rib cages shook with mirthquakes ranking high on the Richter Scale.

ON THE LAWN outside the bedroom, the visitors listened impatiently for the first mopoke call. Mick did some thinking aloud. "It's probly somethin' to do with a bird or an animal."

Then "Mopoke! Mopoke!" sounded clearly through the deepening twilight.

Rick hurried past the kitchen. Jim met him at the woodheap. He folded Rick's hanky as a blindfold and twisted it across his eyes, then told him, "Open your mouth wide, and bite on this apple."

What on earth for?

Jim led Rick by the hand, round the corner to the back of the old laundry.

Jim spoke very softly but in a rather high-handed tone. "Quick! Turn right about."

Rick was so trusting. He obeyed instantly.

He was not kept waiting.

The Big Surprise struck him at once...

Jack was only a metre away. He reached down, grabbed Rick's ankles from behind, and yanked him off his feet. As he fell forward, Jim grabbed his wrists.

Face down, his tormentors took a single step sideways, and dropped him... straight into the old tub for the cow and horses' drinking water: SPLASH!

He surfaced, spluttered, spat water and bits of apple, and ripped off his blindfold as they chanted, "Duck the dirty sniggerer!" He opened his mouth for a yell of rage. They pushed him under: "Double-duck 'im!"

They let him up.

Jack knew his plan was at the cross-roads. If Rick lost his temper, fought, raged, yelled or yelped, no end of double-mopokes would lure Mick and Phil to come as trustingly and alone. It all depended on Rick.

Jack spoke quietly. "Now Rick, don't spoil it for Phil and Mick. They deserve a ducking, too. And you'll enjoy watching it, just like we do. You go down, round to the front of the house. Get your wet things onto the clothesline. Jim's even put your towel there, ready to wear, though he didn't know when you'd use it next. We'll join you in just a jiffy."

Rick was no spoil-sport. Okay, he'd do it. Apple and blindfold he left in the tub. He climbed out, all dripping, pulled a face, shook his fist, and hurried off.

Jim chortled to Jack. "It's like the old mouth-wash with soap — for swear words and dirty stories."

Rick heard Jack calling Phil, "Mopoke! Mopoke!" He went just far enough to glimpse the clothesline: there were six towels silhouetted on it. In that instant, *his* plan came to him. Six towels — three for Lawsons, three for visitors, and put there to dry after showering.

Okay! He'd delay using his. He'd *make sure all six got used...* He peeped back round the corner, watching, waiting.

Action was fast and furious. Phil was dropped in SPLASH! to the chant of "Duck the dirty sniggerer!" and

“Double-duck ’im!”

Phil was sent to join Rick.

Rick whispered to him his Plan for Vengeance.

After the third double-mopoke, in no time at all, it was a SPLASH for Mick. The ritual chant was repeated: “Duck the dirty sniggerer!” and “Double-duck ’im!”

Meanwhile... Rick and Phil had crept back, ready to pounce. Their attack came as a complete surprise.

SPLASH! In went Jack. He did not resist. Nor did Jim and Joe. Already they were wet through from dropping the visitors in, as well as their revenge splashes. It didn’t worry them a teeny bit. What is more, they even managed to keep eating their apples!

Despite their failings, Mick, Rick and Phil were good sports. Besides, Jack and Jim, and even young Joe, felt they had been a trifle light-fingered with the truth, and that some sort of pay-back was due to them.

The six dripping wet boys stood beside the horse trough, and had a good laugh at themselves.

Jack retrieved the three dropped apples and hankies and handed them out at random.

The twilight had deepened into night. With no moon till midnight, they were glad of the lesser brightest bodies, Venus, Jupiter and Sirius, plus the general starlight, all like twinkling lamps on a Jesse tree in a darkened room. They could see their way round to the front clothesline.

Pyjamas and hankies, plus visitors’ singlets and briefs — each item was wrung out and pegged up. Vigorous towelling warmed them, plus swatting mossies.

Mick giggled — definitely *not* a snigger. “Anyone seeing us’d laugh and laugh! We must look silly, out here in the dark like this, getting cold, wearing towels.”

Everyone chuckled. They scoffed off the cake. It

had kept dry in its plastic bag. Joe quoted piously, "Eating apples has cleaned our teeth in advance."

They listened carefully. Low-key grown-up noises from the kitchen were reassuring... To be on the safe side, they went round by the front of the house, and got in again through the verandah and bedroom windows.

Jack switched on the light. "Dry your hair a bit more and I'll put the towels back on the line. Would you three like a loan of nightshirts?" They shook their heads and frowned in horror at such indignity.

Jack was sympathetic. "Okay, Jim. Give 'em our winter pyjamas" — they were under the Lawsons' pillows, at the ready for the customary cold snaps in the summer weather. "We'll sleep in the nightshirts."

The visitors were not used to a cool night after a warm day and were glad enough of winter pyjamas.

Jack slipped on his shorts, collected the towels, and disappeared into the night to hang them on the line once more. He was back in two jiffs, pulled on his nightshirt and announced, "We'd better say our prayers again."

They all knew why. No one complained. The others hopped out of bed. The Lawsons knelt down, making whopping-big Signs of the Cross, and this time, the visitors knelt too, but what they thought or said, only God knew.

After that, everyone slept very soundly.

The day had ended happily after all.