

Chapter 21

One Good Turn...

THE TWINS were only too happy to show off their sewing skills. They had no regrets at leaving some of the morning's schoolwork till later. Besides, Nanna was tactful in being helpful, yet without taking over.

Also, Mum was so good about it, and so patient. There were continual interruptions from the twins for Jack to come and settle unforeseen details. Many things that look easy bristle with difficulties once you start.

Nevertheless, Mum insisted on token lessons, with revision of spelling and tables, plus a quiz.

She meant to start some new work with Tilly, even if not with the others. Tilly protested volubly, "It's not fair!" Her siblings ganged up in her support. The twins solved the impasse by summoning her as an assistant.

Colleen was masterly. She took over the little used lounge room: "Jack, you'll have to sweep this floor. We'll need a very clean flat surface to lay out the cloth."

Fortunately, Jack had done his sketches well and put in all the vital measurements. One sketch showed an artist's view of the finished tent. The other was the plan view of the khaki cloth spread out completely flat — "Like a dingo skin," said Joe, "pegged out to make a fur for the ladies." The others did not bother telling him that the ladies were not so keen on dingo skin.

Kathleen guessed that Jack and Jim did not understand hems. On one of their frequent calls on the boys, she explained, "Hems stop it from fraying." She praised Jack for making allowance for the overlap of the door flaps. Open both ends, they would be a wind tunnel, or one side swung up as a verandah.

She smiled sweetly. "We have to leave a bit of extra all around for the hems, as well as extra for the overlap where the separate strips are stitched together."

Three long strips, each about 5m, would stretch over the ridge rope and down each side, to make the A-shape. Of these, two would be the full 100cm width of the cloth, plus a narrower strip between them, to span the six foot sides. The four triangular doors were cut separately, as extras. All in all, it took much more cloth than the boys had thought, which made it heavier.

Jack knew his limitations and surrendered to the goodwill of his sisters. "Would it be difficult to sew this in as a ridge rope?" He produced three metres of sash cord left over from Dad's work on the windows.

Colleen re-assured him, "It's a cinch, boy, for us professionals, that is. Oh, and send Joe back with the eyelets. We'll make it double strength where the strain in the pegs goes on the cloth via the eyelets."

The boys found the eyelets among the riches bequeathed them by Old Fred. The punch was in the jar with them. As he had told the boys on Sunday: "Everything's labelled because my memory's failing."

The twins finished the cutting out and most of the sewing, including sewing in the ridge-rope that stopped the fabric sliding across it. It meant the sloping walls met at an Λ at the rope with a round O on top, or even a bit like an Ω whose feet angled out and down.

Jack asked meekly, "What could we use for tapes to tie the flaps?" The twins obliged. From their sewing baskets, they produced tape about a centimetre wide. These were quickly stitched onto both insides and outsides of the four flaps. Again, it used much more tape than the boys had imagined.

The resourcefulness of the girls was a good lesson

for the boys. Indeed, Jack told Mum, "The girls've done much more technology this morning than us, so you'd better credit it to their home-science schoolwork."

Still in the lounge room, the twins got Jack and Jim to tie the flaps. They directed them to hold up the shapeless heap of khaki by the ridge rope. Then they got Joe, Tilly, Tommy and Billy to act as tent pegs by spreading the bottom corners to make a rectangle.

The twins were the first to stand back and admire it. Then they fetched Mum and Nanna.

After that, the holder-uppers and the holder-outers swapped places, so everyone had a turn at going *Oooh* and *Aaah*.

The boys were deeply impressed. They cheered the twins and Tilly along with many a thank-you.

Kathleen told the boys. "You'd better set it up outside before lunchtime, in case we need to make final adjustments."

"We want to be finished with it this morning," Colleen pointed out, "so we can catch up what we've missed of our own schoolwork."

The boys pitched the tent on the higher side of the house, outside the kitchen. They got the four straightest sticks on the woodheap, to make a pair of poles meeting at Λ for each end, and not a single vertical pole in the middle of each doorway. Their scheme used slightly longer poles. Also, they wanted to hoist the fabric off the ground for the waterproofing.

Jack explained, "Now it's ready for us to slap on the waterproofing after tea, and we'll leave it pitched overnight to let the smell blow off."

So it was that, punctually at half past eleven, according to Dad's unusual timetable, the family gathered in the kitchen for a triumphant lunch.

As a rule, Colleen, spoke for the twins, but today it was Kathleen who beamed on her brothers. "Boys, this afternoon, could you please mend the holes in our tennis court netting?"

Well, they could hardly refuse, could they? Jack glanced at Jim for his nod of approval. Joe would follow their lead anyway — as well as making objections as each new detail was debated.

Jack replied graciously, "One good turn deserves another. We'll start straight after the washing up."

Jim considered there was a certain double-dealing in Jack's response — was it simply polite, or low cunning?

Anyway, the twins took the hint. "We'll wash up."

Joe spoke up importantly. "I've got just the right netting for you, in *my* outdoor storage depot" — no coarse uncivilized language like 'rubbish dump' — "it's netting I was saving for a bigger chookyard, but there's plenty to spare for patching your tennis court — an' even for building you a bigger veggie garden later."

Nanna grinned. "Good on you, Joe, for ingenuity."

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For the first time, they did not need a crank-handle to start up the Land Rover. At last, its self-starter worked, its radiator didn't leak water, nor its sump leak oil. Best of all, the foot brake worked. Much safer!

They drove across to the old quarry and gazed on the netting. It would not be so easy to extricate it from the dump.

Jack asked Joe, "Are you strong enough to burrow in there and tie on a rope, to tow it with the Rover?"

Of course Joe was, he could and he would. He reminded them, "Nanna said I had lots of engine."

Jim couldn't resist twitting him. "Yo ho nope no, Joe. You mean 'ingenuity'."



SAFE FOR A LIGHTWEIGHT LIKE JOE

In the best Aussie traditions, Joe rejoined, "Exactly what I said, diddle I, yo ho yep yes?"

Jim tied a bowline round Joe's waist. Joe waded in. "Take it over the top of those old cars," Jack advised, "or we might tow them out by mistake."

Joe waved and set out across the frozen sea of storm-tossed junk. He stumbled over a tangle of barbed wire. Jim called reassuringly, "If yer get trapped, we can tow yer out, too." Joe ignored him.

Jack and Jim watched their little brother keenly as he belayed the rope to a long roll of netting.

"Good," declared Jack. "He used a bowline."

Joe had to show off: he 'waded ashore', using both hands on the rope as though hauling himself through heavy surf, or crossing a flooded river. He emerged with rips in flesh and clothes. Jack and Jim considered that quite normal — as did their parents.

Jack roped a catspaw onto the hook on the front bumper. He would drive backwards for quick stopping if the netting fouled on the rest of the junk.

Slowly he backed away from the edge.

It worked well, far better than they'd hoped.

The boys knew they were lucky — Murphy's Law almost always applied to their enterprises, but was happily suspended that afternoon.

Jim suggested, "Get another one, Joe, a smaller one, cos we're only going to cut it up for patches." This proved easy, and without using the Rover.

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The actual mending business was finicky and could not to be completed in one afternoon. They made joins using loose strands on the netting or some of the thin tie-wire with which Old Fred's hoard was blessed.

Some of the bigger rents in the dilapidated netting

were high up. Jim improvised a rickety stepladder made of one of Old Fred's short ladders with a prop. It was only safe for a lightweight like Joe, and with Jack and Jim buttressing on the sides.

The twins came out to watch, and applaud. They understood the ego-appetite of men and boys.

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Jack looked at the sun to get the time.

"How about waterproofing the tent?" suggested Jim.

Jack grunted. "There's just enough afternoon left to get one big load of wood. We've gotta do that."

Jim agreed. "Okay, let's try our side-trail towards the top of Jacob's Ladder." Then hopefully, "You never know, the Triplets were there last Monday..."

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AS THEY SWUNG off the main trail on Swampy Ridge, Jim reminded Jack to drive quietly. That was easier now he had a foot brake and did not depend on low gears and their high-pitched whine.

Sure enough, the Shy Spy Triplets *were* there. Unlike a week ago, when the Lawsons first saw them, they were spread out over fifty metres of the track.

"What on earth are they up to?" puzzled Jim.

Whatever it was, one thing was certain. The arrival of the Land Rover set off a scramble of frantic action.

Shadrach and Meshach were further away but the Lawsons saw them first. They had been propping up a long stick, which they now dropped like a red hot poker.

The Lawsons watched it swish its way to the ground and land with a little thump.

Closer to the Rover, Abednego was bending down, ramming something into a knapsack. Shadrach and Meshach raced back to him, and folded together three hinging legs which were about a metre long.

Even as Jack, Jim and Joe scrambled from the cab, the Shy Spies from Galway Craggs were haring off downhill. Shadrach had the three sticks, and Meshach had the knapsack. It was a fast getaway. Moreover, they veered off into the undergrowth on the left.

"Shows they can't get down our cliff," chortled Joe.

The scrub-crashing noises faded rapidly.

"Don't bother chasing them," ordered Jack. "From the spread of that noise, they've split up."

Jim reminded them. "Besides, we know where to find 'em if we wanta get 'em."

Joe's eyes gleamed. "In that case, we can ambush 'em there, right at their secret camp, at *our* Secret Water. Yo ho yep yes we can! We can easily get there first. *They* don't know the quick ways to Koala Creek by Paradise or by Cubby's Cave Canyon."

"But they'd just clam up like oysters if we ask 'em anything," urged Jim.

"Then torcher 'em!" — That, of course, was Joe.

His brothers ignored him. "Let's find out first what their long stick's for." Jack was already striding down to where Shadrach had been.

He picked it up the pole near the middle. "It's two sticks joined with a lashing," he told them, "and tied tight by an expert. See the frapping turns?"

"No wonder it was hard for them to hold it up," observed Jim. "See how long it is?"

Jack was pacing the length. "About ten metres," he murmured. Then to Joe, "Trot back to where Abednego was standing and I'll tell you what to do."

With Jim's help, Jack "walked" the long pole upright, like two men setting up a big ladder.

"Now, Joe, from where you are, what lines up with the top of this pole?"

This was too hard for Joe. "Just trees and trees."

"Come here then, and help hold the thing," ordered Jack, "and let Jim have a squiz at it."

Even Jim was hesitant. "It's sort of in-line with the top of the trunk of the big tree," he announced.

Jack pondered shrewdly, "Maybe it's a gadget for working out the height of a tree."

* * * *

They were late home and unloading the wood, and had to scramble to get through all the family jobs and their showers. Indeed, it was a close call tumbling into their kitchen chairs for tea.

At that evening's convivium, 'the littlies' began their own colourful account of their brothers towing the netting out of the dump.

"What could *you* possibly know about it?" challenged Jim.

Aha! With a triumphant grin, Tilly told him. "Before yous even got there, we wus hidden in the bushes. *We* heard everything you said. *We* saw everything you did. *We* know! *We* saw Joe the hero."

At this, Joe swelled fit to bust, just like the famous Mr Toad at his vainest. Its entertainment value for the littlies had made their day.

After that, Jack and Jim made a joint report. Jack began, "The Land Rover's now a pleasure to drive."

Jim described their sighting of the Shy Spy Triplets. "We're sure they're measuring the heights of the best trees so their Dad can buy our place and make money selling the timber."

Righteous indignation flamed forth from all the children.

Mum said mildly, "It might be an outdoor science survey. Remember, we heard the oldest boy's keen on

nature study and all that, on trees and soil and native animals, and good on him.”

Dad spoke in favour of Mr Dollerman. “Their father’s got the reputation of a rich man who’s kind and generous, you know, like Zacchaeus in the Gospel.”

Nanna emphasized the social point of view. “Those boys sound to me just like you three — you know, good and Godly but with fun that merges off into mischief.” She smiled affectionately at her grandsons. “Perhaps they even lapse occasionally into sin...” After looking at them kindly, she finished, “We can’t expect perfection in others when we haven’t got it ourselves.”

There was a beepedy-beep from the hall — the mobile phone. With its aerial high on the roof, it now had range. Dad and Mum preferred incoming calls, since the family would not have to pay for them.

Dad got up and was away for what seemed ages.

Jack and Jim went on to describe getting firewood, with a balancing input from Joe. The family finished their prunes and rice. Over second cups of tea, they ventured guesses about the phone caller.

Finally, they said grace after meals and Mum directed, “Get the washing up started while Nanna and I do bedtime stories for the littlies. But we won’t put them to bed just yet.”

“Who on earth’s Dad talking to?” puzzled Jim.

“Some looney,” suggested Joe. Joe was a trifle negative sometimes.

“We’ll soon know when he comes back,” said Jack. Then, on reflection, “But of course, it may be private.”

Chapter 22

An Even Better Plan

THEY HAD JUST finished the washing up when Dad came back from the phone.

He wore a grin like the Cheshire Cat — the sort of grin which was so encouraging to his sons.

By deduction or intuition, Mum, Nanna and the littlies reappeared, bursting in to know what-for.

All eyes were on him. He throttled back his grin to the glimmer of a smile.

In his usual fashion, he paused before speaking. Then, “That was Ben’s mother responding to this morning’s email, and with a lot to say.”

Dad was much-practised at intensifying curiosity.

For a moment, Jack, Jim and Joe feared it was bad news — maybe the worst? Had something gone wrong about Friday? Maybe the visitors couldn’t come? The unease on their faces was there for all to read.

Well, well, well. And Jack quoted aloud, “The best laid plans of men and mice are oft to go astray.”

Nanna capped this: “Man proposes, God disposes.”

BUT FEAR YE NOT! Dad had Good News — in fact, Good News Plus, though he wiped his glimmering smile and put on his solemn look to deliver it. He eyed the boys, then burst out abruptly:-

“As I said, that was Ben’s Mum. She got the email this morning, and discussed it with her husband and then the other parents. Yes, they sure want them to come! But may Ben, Ken and Steve come two days early, on the 12.45p.m. train on Wednesday, and stay till Saturday morning?”

The grins on the boys now split their faces from ear

to ear. They thumped each other's backs in triumph. But two more bushy days? Could they squeeze an approval from Dad and Mum? Best go gradually...

Mum interrupted Dad — but not to object, challenge or complain. Rather, it was an excess of curiosity. "But Max, why on earth? Did she tell you?"

Dad smiled as though it were hard for him to be patient, and resumed where he had left off. "She says she's checked the trains and they're okay both ways, and that her Bess would still escort the three boys, that is, if we can cope with such an earlier influx of visitors."

Mum persisted: "But why on earth?"

Dad grinned. "It's due to family politics — in all three homes. It seems there's no one to pack the boys up and drive them to the train on Friday, nor even Thursday. I won't confuse you with the labyrinthine ways of her thoughts, but it amounts to this. The boys must be back by late Sunday morning for something or other — oh, a parish school fête and sports' day — though I didn't think those boys played much sport."

"They don't, Dad," Jim assured him. He glanced at Jack. "We're only hoping they'll be tough enough for the bush."

Dad resumed. "Well, Meg, I told her I must consult you first, then I'll ring her back. What do you think?" He was more solemn than ever. "Can our sons afford to lose Thursday's *precious* school work as well as Wednesday's? Or should we invite the visitors to join them in the schoolwork? And you twins, can you cope with Bess? Of course, she'll help you with your jobs, but she might hinder your studies?"

Colleen and Kathleen smiled sweetly. "Aw, Dad! We'll manage her all right — and you're welcome."

Far more than Jack and Jim, Mum knew how to

squeeze the best advantage from any situation. She glanced at her aged mother. "I suppose, Nanna, we could stretch a point..." For the boys' benefit, she lengthened her silence, before declaring, "As long as there were balancing factors..."

That was jargon beyond Jim and Joe. Jack, however, was not surprised at what came next. As though doubting herself, Mum dragged out her words as she addressed the boys. The rest of the family listened eagerly, indeed agog, with enough curiosity to kill half a dozen Cheshire Cats.

No restrictions Mum might impose could spoil the prospects of undiluted freedom — 'within reason, of course' — once they got out of sight into the bush.

"Boys! Your own training camp is tomorrow night and, while you've planned for your friends' arrival on Friday afternoon for another overnight camp, it does not mean you have to take them camping on their arrival night here, if it's Wednesday. And there's plenty of time for us to decide that tomorrow — it'll depend on your log books from Tuesday."

Jack was thinking fast. Actually, Mum was wrong, but it would be better not to say so. If they didn't start the visitors camping on Wednesday night, Thursday night was out, because of the special Mass on Friday morning, and that would leave only Friday night, since on Saturday night the Lawson boys must sleep at home, ready for Sunday Mass. Yet they expected nothing less than two nights in the tent with their friends.

Dad looked at Mum. "Do I tell her, yes, definitely, come on the early train on Wednesday afternoon?"

Mum nodded. The boys knocked over their chairs to jump up and shout, and then continue to jump and dance around, making victory signs with hands clasped

high. Dad went back to the phone.

He was back much sooner than last time. "I've rung Ben's Mum and assured her that someone'll meet the Wednesday train at 12.45 p.m. Oh, I told her they'll need Note Books and pencils in their shirt pockets."

He turned to Jack and Jim. "I've got that half kilo of sausages you wanted for tomorrow night, but we won't get extra for Wednesday night, not yet."

Their 'Thanks, Dad!' was heartfelt.

By now the littlies had dropped in their tracks and lay sprawled out all ways, fast asleep.

Family Prayers were said at once, and 'Good Night' greetings exchanged among those still awake.

Mum picked up Tilly, Nanna the baby Bridget, and the twins scooped up Tommy and Billy.

Before Mum vanished into the corridor, Jack asked a special favour, "May us boys be excused from the story, please, just this once, to get our waterproofing done before bedtime?"

He knew his request should go to the family's executive officer, because with Dad as Captain, he would insist on the normal chain of command — otherwise it would be a usurpation.

However, Mum looked the question back to Dad.

Yes, Dad agreed. "All right by me, Meg, and while the boys are doing it, I'll tell them what they need to know. After I'd finished with his wife, Ben's father had a deal to say, which I can tell you later."

Jack, Jim and Joe were puzzled. What on earth would Ben's father have to say that concerned them?

Although Dad was within earshot, Jim thought out aloud. "What's old Ironbark up to now?" This, was dangerously close, according to Mum, of calling names, but the boys knew that Dad liked this nickname from

their famous forebear, the leader of the Mighty Three — that is, according to those historians they agreed with.

Dad grinned. He ignored Jim. “I’d like to see the waterproofing. Get me when you’re ready and I’ll tell what Ben’s father said.”

Earlier, Jack had found Old Fred’s raw linseed and turpentine oils, and beeswax and paraffin wax.

He set Joe to hack off roughly equal chunks of both waxes till they tipped the scales at half a pound (225gm). Then Joe chopped them into small bits and put them in a tin.

Jim had a second tin into which he poured a litre and a half of each of the oils.

Jack fetched the big kettle from the kitchen. He poured boiling water into two metal buckets.

Then they sat each tin in a bucket of boiling water. This would melt the waxes and make the oil as hot as they could safely get it.

These floating tins with their precious contents were inclined to float too high and topple over. Jim dropped in some heavy bolts.

Finally, using pairs of pliers as grips, they lifted the tins out, sat them on the floor, and slowly poured the melted wax into the hot oils.

They all had a turn at stirring the mixture with a stick until the waxes dissolved completely.

Joe scoffed. “I’d heat the whole show on the stove.”

Jim laughed scornfully. “Yeah, just like heating gunpowder! It’d go off all right, and you’d be like the remains of the nasty yellow dog¹, splattered against the fence... *This* is the only safe way of doing it.”

Jack said, “Like a good chap, Joey, run off and fetch

1 In Henry Lawson’s short story, *The Loaded Dog*.

Dad. Tell 'im we've made the waterproofing and we'd like his undivided attention."

Jim's comment was, "Joe'll never remember."

"It won't matter if he garbles it," said Jack, "because Dad'll get the idea all right."

He was proved right. Dad came back with Joe.

Jack divided the mixture between the two tins, and Jim handed out the four biggest paint brushes.

Outside at the tent, with two of them on each side, they started slapping on the mixture.

Now Dad told them his news. "Last night, after you had typed your new emails, I tried to ring the fathers of your friends. I could only get through to Steve's. Steve's Dad told me how much the three of them were hoping for an invitation. So they're eager for the emails."

This was heartening news. The reports from the earlier visitors had been favourable. Good! You never knew with some people...

Dad continued. "Tonight, Ben's Dad said much the same as Steve's, and a bit more. He assured me he was speaking for the other dads, too. It seems they hope you'll toughen up their sons."

Max Lawson now got onto his own hobby horse — slavery to gadgetry, TV, internet, mobiles. Listening to continuous noise, gawking at little images, poor attention span. Then uncontrolled at home, flabby 'muscles' of moral character and lack of rough games, and boys not let do anything without girls, indeed forced to play contact sport with girls..."

Phew! They'd heard it all before, and even Jack only understood bits of it. Jim and Joe put on their 'faithful hound' look when it hears its master's voice.

Meanwhile they painted on the waterproof mixture,



MAKING THE WATERPROOFING

and did a second coat. Now Dad moved onto practical matters. "It seems Simon and Dominic, and now Mick, Rick and Phil, have boasted to eager audiences how brave and tough they were. What comes across is that all Uncle Wal's boy-scout things were done to them."

He noted the dismay on Jack's face. "Don't worry, these dads want you to *do* whatever it was to their sons! They trust you. Heaven knows what their wives might think of Bush Boy Explorers eating their own cooking, swimming in muddy creeks, and possibly sleeping in their clothes in a home-made tent — let alone if they knew about the Seven Deadly Dangers that lead to death in the bush... Anyhow, while Ben, Ken and Steve are a bit shy at their prospects, they're eager for it."

Jack felt he had to protest. "But Dad! We *didn't* do the Uncle Wal stuff to anyone. And we only *do* with visitors what we usually do ourselves."

Dad's eyes twinkled. "I know, I know, and I approve, and their fathers approve. They know you won't wreck their health or hurt their feelings, or do anything that's a crime or a sin."

Joe's eyes twinkled, too. But with mischief. "We could even do some extra things..."

Dad did not ask for details and was glad none were proffered. "I assured their dads there'd be nothing sissy and everyone'd be happy and looked after."

Jim was a bit tactless in his expression. "Do they know we've blown up your discovery method, Dad?"

Dad replied blandly, "I'm sure, Jim, you'll explain all that to them better than I could."

The fabric was now so soaked in the mixture it could absorb no more. Jack declared, "That'll do it." It grieved him that part of Old Fred's process was being omitted: "We won't have time to iron it in this time."

They squeezed out the brushes, rinsed them in a little turps, and washed them in soap and hot water.

Jack stored the spare mixture into a bottle and with a permanent marker wrote a label, 'Waterproof Mixture for Tents'. Jim added the simple words, 'Deadly Poison', and Joe a skull and cross-bones.

"It's quite clear," declared Joe, "if you drink this, you'll drop down deady-bones in a screaming heap."

"One more thing," said Dad. "Their fathers are shrewd and told their sons not to argue if their mums make'em bring things they won't use, like dressing gowns. I told their Dads you wouldn't let anyone carry frills into the bush. So we're keeping everyone happy."

* * * *

The boys set off to write up their usual Log Books.

Joe had a picture with six stick figures. The smallest was leading the way: "That's me," he told his brothers — as if they didn't know. The other figures had labels, too. Jack as captain was third in line, and Jim last as vice-captain and rear-guard.

For their part, the first thing Jack and Jim did was to see if the A6-size note books fitted their shirt pockets. They did, but only just, and the pocket flap would not shut over them, so they might slide out unawares.

They wrote in their names and addresses. Jack looked over Jim's shoulder and read aloud, "Jim Lawson, 'Terra Sancta', Swampy Creek Road, Guntawang, Australia, Southern Hemisphere, Planet Earth".

Jack pointed an accusatory finger at this pretension. "Too bad if you happen to lose it on the Moon — the postie mightn't know it was this Solar System."

By now, Joe had fallen asleep. Jack and Jim put him to bed in the usual way and continued to talk.

What with the Friday, Saturday and Sunday just past

with Mick, Rick and Phil — the ‘city slickers’ as Joe had called them — Jack told Jim, “In my usual Log Book I’m writing draft plans for our first over-night camping expedition, and more plans for three camping days with Ben, Ken and Steve.”

“Okey-dokey,” agreed Jim, “and in mine, I’ll do the Triplets doing tree heights — but it’s gunna be short.”

It sure was short! Jim started and finished thus:-

- SST were measuring trees: but what for?

After that, the wells of his imagination and memory ran dry. He peeped over Jack’s shoulder: his brother’s pencil was scribbling fast.

This prompted Jim to think of more things to put. The humble make progress with inspiration from others. So the rest of Jim’s entry was really Jack’s:-

- Tuesday arvo: set up a comfy camp at *Paradisum*.
- Wed. morning: leave tent pitched, explore a bit, spy on SST.
- Wed. arvo (1) Explorer’s Log Books checked by Mum;
(2) meet train, walk the visitors home to test their walking;
(3) check their bush clothes and gear;
(4) down Jacob’s Ladder to Camp Paradise.
- Thursday (1) a ‘Tiger Walk’ by compass up-&-down-&-up to Mount Zodiac, checking bearings from each high point.
- Thursday (2) arrive home for jobs and tea.
- Friday after Mass: first from *Terra Sancta* direct to Little Bogie, downstream to drop off more food at *Paradisum*; then by Koala Creek to Greg’s Ducky, up to King’s Cave, and back to *Paradisum*.
- Saturday morning: via Big Bogie & Koala Spur to home.

Jim admitted to himself that Jack was like a tow-truck to a conked out car.

Brothers are wonderful!

Chapter 23

Beforehand

JACK WOKE first and very early that Tuesday. It had been a night of vivid dreams, and his mind was fairly buzzing. It burst into greater clarity on waking — about things needing to be done, and some at once.

He recalled Dad's principle, "What is first in intention is last in execution". It was a tight little formula in need of explanation: "To arrive where you want to go, you must take all the steps needed to get there."

Their own very first camp would begin that afternoon. And there was still quite a lot to get ready.

Another high priority was that, while their visitors were coming tomorrow afternoon, the Lawson boys still needed the okay to take them camping straight away.

He woke Jim. Naturally, this made Joe wake, too. Like Jim, Joe sat up, all alert, and tuned in.

Jack grinned at his brothers. "The first thing we've gotta do is turn on a star turn with the jobs before breakfast, and sweeten them up — for bargaining. And then we've gotta make sure they haven't had those awful second thoughts that afflict grown-ups."

Jim grinned back. "Yeah! And don't forget, we still haven't finished the list of all the things to take this arvo... to make sure we don't leave anything behind."

Without doing it consciously, Jack was 'bringing out the best in others' — a basic quality for a leader of men. "Okay, let's get started, and say our prayers and all that."

* * * *

Though Tuesday was not a washing day, Jack

intended to have the kindling and sticks ready to light in the laundry coppers for washing day on Wednesday.

At breakfast, they laid on the 'sweeteners' thick and fast, with what they considered the last word in tact.

Jack opened up breezily. "Mum, if we work like billy-oh at school this morning, and get out of your way this arvo and tomorrow morning, how about we get out of the way tomorrow arvo as well — you'd work better with the twins on Thursday without us distracting you?"

In case this was not clear, Jim added, "We'd do it by taking Ben, Ken and Steve camping as soon as they come — and not wait till Friday."

Mum and Dad and Nanna looked at each other. The three of them laughed uproariously, just like children.

Jack and Jim realized that Mum and Dad must have decided the matter already, and without sweeteners.

But everything in due order. Their second joy was that Dad proved himself their vigorous supporter. He had always spurned red-tape, 'padding', 'boomph', and what he called educational gobble-dee-gook.

"At my school," he began, "all serious lessons have finished already. The exams are over. The teachers are grouchy with a year's wear and tear. They're either marking exams or child-minding on wearisome trips to the council swimming pool. Plus the bedlam and mayhem of free periods. If it wasn't for the Department of Education, the teachers'd send the whole crowd home, to amuse themselves and leave them in peace. The trouble is, there are kids who'd rather be at school — they've nothing to do at home but computer games and surf the internet all accompanied by loud *musak*. They vegetate in cyberspace with the electronic fairies."

This blunt recital shocked Mum. "But surely, Max, that doesn't happen in primary schools?"

Dad shrugged, so Jim got in first. "Last year, Mum, our school finished up just like that — there were kids running round everywhere" — he groped for a figure of speech — "something like Joe's chooks when he sooled the goanna onto them."

Joe took no offence. If they grinned or laughed at the memory, his delight was even greater.

Nanna asked, "Surely they're busy cleaning up?"

Jim assured her, "Lots of boys told to clean up are busy lurking out sight to get out of it."

At last Dad addressed the vital matter at hand.

"Yes, once you've met your visitors and brought them home, you can take them camping at once. But you must be back here to sleep Thursday night, so we can get to Mass on time early on Friday — it's a holy day, you know — and again on Saturday night, to be ready for our usual Sunday Mass, and you serving."

Before the boys could hurrah in delight, Mum turned to the twins. "Could Bess sing with you in the choir on Sunday?"

"She sings like an archangel," declared Kathleen poetically.

The boys didn't think her singing was relevant. However, they did not say so. Instead, they chortled as they thumped each other's upper arms and shoulders.

* * * *

After breakfast, which had taken longer than Dad's scheduled 30 minutes, there was not enough time for his full 45 minute lesson. Ever flexible, he cut it short, and still showed his flare for imaginative teaching.

He glanced at Colleen and Kathleen, to make sure they felt included, though it was the boys who were going camping. "Before the boys start camping in *your* tent," he told the girls, "all of us might recall tents in

the Bible.” He paused. “Which apostle made tents?”

Dad usually expected the youngest to answer first. He gave Joe the nod.

Joe was non-plussed. “I thought they wuz all just like me, you know, catching fish, big ones, of course.”

Jim grinned but did no better. “Not all. Saint Matthew was a taxman and Judas had the purse...”

Jack ranged further afield. “The Israelites kept the Ark of the Covenant in a big tent called the Tabernacle before they got a temple...” — but he knew he was not addressing the question. This turned out for the best, as it let the twins show their prowess.

Colleen warbled, “Saint Paul made tents! He was an apostle, but an extra to the twelve.” Then, with a triumphant put-down of Joe, “And there were other disciples besides the Twelve — some just like us girls!”

Kathleen added, “He made tents on his missionary trips so his converts didn’t have to shout him free feeds.”

Dad said, “Very good, everyone, especially the girls.”

As he turned to go, Jack presented him with another shopping list. “This is food we haven’t got at home to take on Wednesday and Friday nights, Dad. It’s four times as much as for tonight, because there are twice as many boys and twice as many meals. This Friday’s not penitential, so sausages would be okay again, please.”

Dad read aloud; “4 pkts freeze-dried peas & corn, 2 pkts Deb potato, 2 kg sausages.”

In case Dad didn’t know, Jim told him, “*Pkt* is short for packet.” Dad nodded; he knew *pkt* and he knew Jim.

They farewelled Dad affectionately. “We’ll be gone before you get home,” they reminded him.

* * * *

At little lunch, they did justice to Nanna’s gem scones. She had just spread the butter, and it was

melting-in to the piping hot scones. They added the raspberry jam themselves, gluttonous quantities by Jack, Jim, Joe and Tommy, but with Tilly doing everyone else's just as her mother would. The scones did the right thing — they melted in your mouth. Happily, Nanna had made double the usual. With the sharper edges of appetite blunted, Tilly rang the bell.

Joe groaned, "More school." Optimist Jim said, "Last time!" Jack was silent, for his mind was roving through his labyrinthine lists of food, gear, packaging and carrying. He kept muddling up this afternoon's camp for three, with Wednesday's for six, and again on Friday arvo, with all the extra food.

Fortunately, Mum and Nanna toned down the intensity of school work, and Jack had time to plan:-

TOTAL FOOD for 3 boys for 3 meals:-

S = mildly heaped soup spoon;

SS = level soup spoon;

C = medium mug 325 ml

| "TEA" Tue. | BREKKY Wed. | LUNCH Wed. |
|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| tea × 2 S | tea × 2 S | tea × 2 S |
| milk × 6 S | milk × 6 S | milk × 3 S |
| sugar × 6 SS | sugar × 6 SS | sugar × 3 SS |
| sausages × 6 | oats × 1 C | |
| onion × 1, Gravox | rolls × 3 | rolls × 6 |
| potatoes × 3 | butter × 3 SS | butter × 3 S |
| spinach × 3 leafs | eggs × 3 | cheese × 3 chunks |
| salt × 1 SS | salt × pinch | |
| custard × 2 S | jam × 3 S | jam × 3 S |
| sultanas × 3 S | | dates × 12 |

PLUS SNACKS: Anzac Biscuits × 9; Toffees × 6; and extra tea, milk, sugar (just in case) as at lunchtime.

Jim was critical. "I saw you changin' things, Jack, all that rubbin' out and gettin' a headache. Let's just

take lots of extra so we can't run out. Joe'll fuss if we don't feed him lots — we don't need any extra fuss.”

Jack was tempted to agree, but remembered Greg's bushy wisdom at big Bogie: “People only do that the first time, then come home tired and cross from carrying lots of extra weight they never used. Remember Simon and Dominic? They didn't use any of the things we tried to make 'em leave behind, and we were the muggins who carried it for them when they conked...”

Jim had to admit this was so.

So in a kindly fashion, Jack paid him back. “Okay, Jim, you make a list of the gear for this arvo, for each boy and for what's shared.”

Jim found it harder than he'd thought. He had to look up the *ABC of Camping* and whisper to Jack. And he did lots of changing things and rubbing out. Finally he wrote out a tidy version. Just before lunch he presented it to Jack:-

| GEAR FOR EACH | GEAR FOR GROUP |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| hat/shirt/shorts/socks/boots | First Aid, torch, Citronella |
| hanky/string/matches/Rosary | pocket knife |
| note book, pencil | compass, map, rope |
| blanket-swags: Joe & Jack | Jim's swag: tent/floor/blanket |
| knapsack: Jack | Hessian sugar bag: Jim |
| mug/spoon, dixie×2, bowl | billy×2; scourer; soap |
| Parka, tooth brush | toothpaste; toilet paper |

Jack studied the detail carefully and declared it, “Good! We'll work out the fine detail as we pack it.”

* * * *

Lunch was one of those unusual meals that they ate without noticing it, with no idea what they were eating. Their minds were full of plans, plans, and more plans... and the supreme delight of happy expectations.

After lunch, Jack told the twins, "I'll set a fire ready to light in the pot-bellied stove for your baths tonight. For tomorrow's laundry, the kindling and the bigger stuff's in the fire boxes ready for a match. Tomorrow arvo, we plan to get back from meeting the visitors in time to do all our own jobs as usual, before setting out on our second camp."

Kathleen told Jim, "I'll lock up Bubs for you tonight and milk Buttercup in the morning."

Similarly, Colleen told Joe, "I'll help Tilly and Tommy with the chooks this arvo, if they need it."

Kathleen told all three of them, "We'll do the wash-up now, so you can all pack your gear."

"Thank you!" chorused the boys, who failed to realize it was more peaceful when they were away...

"Say your goodbyes to us before our nap," Mum invited them, "and get going as soon as you're ready."

It took a good deal longer than Jim and Joe had thought to pack the food and gear. They were glad when Jack came in from setting the fire for the evening hot water for the rest of the family. He was very good at packing loads suited to each boy's size.

Jack frowned. "I've just realized. We don't need lunch for tomorrow, we'll be back here for it." So they had to reduce the food to fit two meals, not three.

Jack had a swag across his chest, with blanket and Parka, and food in their one knapsack on his back.

Jim had a huge swag across his back. It was held on by a bandolier of sash cord, padded with two spare hankies on his right shoulder. It had the tent and groundsheet, and his own blanket and Parka. In front, a Hessian 'dilly bag' hung from his left shoulder, with mugs, billies, dixies, bowl and some tucker.

Joe was let off light with a blanket-swag across his

back for his blanket and Parka.

With hats on, staffs in hand, swags slanting down their backs, but with Jack's in front to leave room for his knapsack on his back, they made a brave showing.

The twins were proud of them.

"Thanks again for the beaut tent," said Jack gruffly, as they waved farewell. "We'll lend it to you any time you want it."

Colleen grinned. "Thanks — we'll make some tentative plans of our own." Was the pun deliberate?

The boys tramped across the home-paddock singing their best marching tune, *Onward Christian Soldiers*. They bellowed it out. Volume replaced tune. It carried them through the slip-rails and down to the end of the side-trail.

They plunged onwards through the big timber. Their smashing of the smaller scrub was now the only sound. They plunged down the familiar side-ridge to where it divided into a valley with low sides and a steeply sloping floor.

And lo! spread below to left and right were The Walls of Paradise. So far, so good.

Jack remembered the near disasters with Mick, Rick and Phil. He also cautioned his brothers: "When we find The Devil's Burrow, don't go taking the big plunge like Rick did the other day." Prophetic words.

Jim's reply was chirpy. "Yeah, yeah, but we've got to find it first."

They began to hunt for the way down, for the elusive entrance to The Devil's Burrow and the top end of Jacob's Ladder.

They had not learnt their lesson from Sunday morning. Once more, they had to hunt around...

Chapter 24

Setting up a Camp

ALAS and alack! Again, the Lawsons wasted lots of time looking for the upper Secret Entrance.

Jack had been so cocky, declaring, "After last Sunday's muddle, we'll find it easy as winking..." Yet it baffled them. They split up to hunt left and right.

"The trouble is," ruminated Jim, "we came up here only once, and we've only been down it once."

Jack's excuse was, "Yeah. Finding a way down a cliff is always harder than finding a way up."

Again and again they found false chimneys, either vertical or becoming so. Nary a hole, tunnel or ramp. Where oh where was the way they *knew* was there?

Joe cheekily asked, "Jim, should I kick him again?"

Yet it was Joe who finally found it. And quite by accident. Nevertheless, he claimed, "I worked it all out with my branium, yo ho yep yes!" Of course.

New difficulties now arose.

Last time, the big boys, Jack and Mick had carried their knapsacks in the normal fashion, on their backs.

This time, Jack was cluttered up with a swag across his chest and Jim had a sugar bag that swung left-right-left in front of him, like a pendulum. Placing each foot was vital. Besides, Jim had trouble keeping his balance with his load swinging. And their staffs got in the way.

Joe had only a light swag and on his back. But its lower end stuck out and scraped on the sides of the cleft. And it nearly killed the lot of them!

It fouled on a rock jutting out at waist height. To free it, he turned half-sideways. His downhill foot skidded on loose stones. He sprawled on his back, slid

out of control, and crashed into Jim's legs.

Jim broke into a stumbling trot to save his footing.

Joe was still sprawled and sliding full tilt.

Like a toppling domino, Jim flung his arms out in front and shoved Jack in the knapsack.

Jack almost sprawled. If he had, he would have slid and doomed the three of them. Providentially, he kept his footing. He broke into a trot, like a boy jumping off a moving bus.

All three were on the move, and going faster — and heading for the brink of the abyss...

Jack clutched wildly at the uneven rocky sides. The tips of his nails were torn ragged rough. Fingers and hands were scraped and scratched with blood and dirt. Desperately he yelled, "Hold onto the sides! Drop your staffs!"

They did. They came to a halt, puffing with effort, nursing their wounds. The threat was over. "Phew!"

Joe's hand, knees and elbows were battered and would need patching. Still, that was not unusual for Joe.

Jim pondered, "I don't like the idea of bringing the softies down here — they're fairly clumsy."

Jack groaned. "How true! So we'll use a rope."

Jim knocked that. "There's nothing at the top to tie a rope that reaches to the big drop. So it's take 'em round to the lower entrance or find another way in."

"Okay," Joe declared breezily, "Let's try to find another way in — if it exists."

They got down to the tree line, and well into it, before they alarmed the birds and kangaroos.

"And now we gotta make new staffs," Jack reminded them. With straight sticks everywhere, making new staffs took all of three minutes.

Thinking hard of ways and means kept them quiet.

Pandemonium broke out just before they got to the edge of the clearing at Paradise Pool.

"That racket of bird and beast'd betray us to the Shy Spies," lamented Jim.

Jack shrugged. "But it works both ways — the same birds and beasts'd warn us of the SST."

"Kangas are *not* beasts," squawked Joe. "I'll have you know they move without a sound, yo ho yep yes!"

This reminded Jack. "Old Fred said maybe the SST are looking for some sort of bird or other."

Joe stopped arguing and gazed longingly at the pool.

But Jack was adamant and Jim agreed. "First things first! The first thing is to make the camp."

Jim and Joe took a running jump across the trickling creek. Jim shed his swag and hessian bag, and Joe his swag. Jim said, "We should camp right here. The grass is soft, and the western trees are close-in to the bush and'll shade us in the afternoon."

For his part, Jack crossed slowly. But he did not shed his gear. He shook his head and quoted from the ABC of Camping:-

**A good campsite has level grassy ground,
no branches overhead,
and is out of the wind and above the flood,
with wood and water handy.**

He continued: "This creek might flood — you know, flash floods, in the stories we read: 'The dreaded stormhead of the western rivers...' And below the dam, it'd be worse if it overflowed or busted."

Jim laughed at him. "You gloomy old pessimist!"

Jack laughed back: "Jim, you lack the concentration of a well-trained bull ant!" — which was dangerously close to breaching the family taboo on calling names...

"I won't dob," Jim assured him cheerfully. Joe

chuckled — the Lawson boys never dobbed.

Jack was deadly serious. "Look up! See? Dead branches overhead! They might clobber us. No, never camp under big trees. What we need is a small clearing" — he pointed back to the east side — "see that grove of small turpentine and bloodwoods. It's 'above the flood', a metre above creek level. It's got a bit of grass, too, as a mattress." As an afterthought, he threw in, "And the water's handy to get from that little rock." Again, he pointed.

"Hearken to 'im, Joe. Jeremiah Jack!" Jim groaned good naturedly. "Doom is nigh! He's said it, and he won't be happy till doom strikes — probly at midnight!" And contemptuously, "*Our* grass is greener than in *his* pocket-handkerchief-of-a-clearing..."

Yet their captain had spoken. Jack reminded them, "The judge's decision is final. And no correspondence will be entered into..." They gave in with good grace.

Jim offered to get the fire going. Last Friday, they had turned the blackened sides of the glassy-smooth slabs of their fireplace downwards. Then on Sunday, they had rebuilt that fireplace and left it standing for next time — which had now arrived.

So Jack lugged Jim's swag to the 'pocket handkerchief-of-a-clearing', and Joe took his own swag.

First, they had to clear the ground litter. For this, Joe used a pair of forked sticks with the prongs overlapped to make a four-tine rake. It was very effective.

They unrolled Jim's swag and got the tent out. With the door flaps untied, it spread over a big area.

Joe wanted it faced towards the pool. Jack shook his head: "Greg Cumberland said the wind is usually up or down a valley, and a tent's supposed to face cross-wind. That means it should be square on to the creek."

They dragged the untidy tangle around till the ridge line pointed at the creek. To get the distance between the corners right, they re-tied the door flap bottoms.

Jack told Joe, "Get ten skinny sticks that'll fit through the eyelets. Sharpen 'em to go into the ground easily. Here's the knife. And two thick sticks for pegs for the two guys. I'll find some poles."

This took them all of five minutes. Jack looked critically at Joe's pegs. "Not very straight."

Joe was never lost for a reply. "Nor are your poles. Only three, an' all crooked, yo ho yep yes they are."

Jack ignored him and said, "Now pull against each other at the corners. It'll stretch out the bottoms of the sides and flaps, to make an oblong area." And it did.

"I'll peg it down," cried Joe.

"And slope the pegs at 45°," Jack told him.

"I know," Joe assured him, "an' I know why."

At the creek end Jack used a square-lashing on two poles to make an Λ . This would be easier to get in and out. He made it high enough for the flaps to just touch the ground, and spread the poles till the flaps were flat. Then he ran the ridge rope through the fork, and clove-hitched it round one of the poles. Finally, he bent onto its free end a short piece of thick string long enough to stretch out at 45°, to be a guy-rope.

Joe pegged it well out from the tent using an adjustable rolling hitch. He'd been practising in secret. It deserved Jack's praise, and got it.

The other end had a single pole. The ridge rope was clove-hitched to it and extra string bent on and pegged.

Joe freed the flaps at the creek end, crawled in and lay on the grass. He screwed his eyes tight, and snored loudly in short bursts with a wonderful whistling finish to each snore. Jack chuckled but said nothing.

By now, Jim had rebuilt the fireplace on a bare patch in a dip in the ground. He lit the fire and hung two billies over it. Joe could see it from inside the tent. Jim inspected the tent. "Cool! Just like the real thing!"

"It *is* the real thing," snorted Jack. "You get the blankets ready while Joe an' I spread the groundsheet.

Jim folded the blankets in three neat piles.

Jack announced, "We've earned a swim. But first, firewood." So each hooked a bundle of sticks under an elbow, with the other hand free to drag a small log.

Then they strung up a rope for shirts and shorts, but kept their hats on against the afternoon sun.

It was only a brief dip. Just to assert their arrival.

Coming out, they tried to splash the mud from their feet, but had to wipe it off with their socks when drying their toes. They dressed in shorts and boots, leaving the shirts damp from towelling on the clothes-rope.

Jim found a straight stick a metre long. "A sun-clock," he announced triumphantly, "and I'll make more pegs for meal-markers."

Jack beamed. "Pretty good, Jim. Real homely."

"Meal-marker!" muttered Joe, for the others to hear. "Sissy rot! I'll tell 'em when I'm hungry. And that's nearly always, so it's always time to eat."

Jim pushed his shadow stick into soft ground in an unshadowed spot, and bashed it in further with a rock.

It was certainly a lot easier looking at a shadow than at the sun. Jack murmured soothingly to himself, "Declination and azimuth, time and direction."

Jim grinned. Joe retorted, "Sheer swank!"

Jack was not offended. "I'll put in a peg now. I guess it's..." — he glanced skyward — "about three o'clock. Tomorrow we can put in another peg at breakfast, "and lunch should be somewhere in between."



PITCHING THE TENT

But next day they forgot, because of making plans to eat lunch at a place where the swimming was shadier.

Jim had a new idea. "There's still time to explore the cliff line before tea." They looked expectantly at Jack.

But Jack's face fell. "Oooops! I forgot" — then to Jim — "Your sun-clock's reminded me. It made me think of Dad. And he makes me think of Mum and her Explorers' Log Books we're supposed to write *before* swimming. So we'd better catch up and do 'em now."

Joe scowled: "I've gotta beaut excuse — I forgot, so it lets me off." But he knew Jack would make him.

Jim shrugged. "Oh well, a bit of log book's a small price to pay for coming here. An' it makes her 'appy."

Jack reminded them that the final okay for Wednesday's camping depended on it. It was *their* test.

They furred back the flaps of the tent at both ends. Any slight movement of air would sweep over their bare tops. With heads propped on left elbows, they knuckled down to their special Explorers' Log Books.

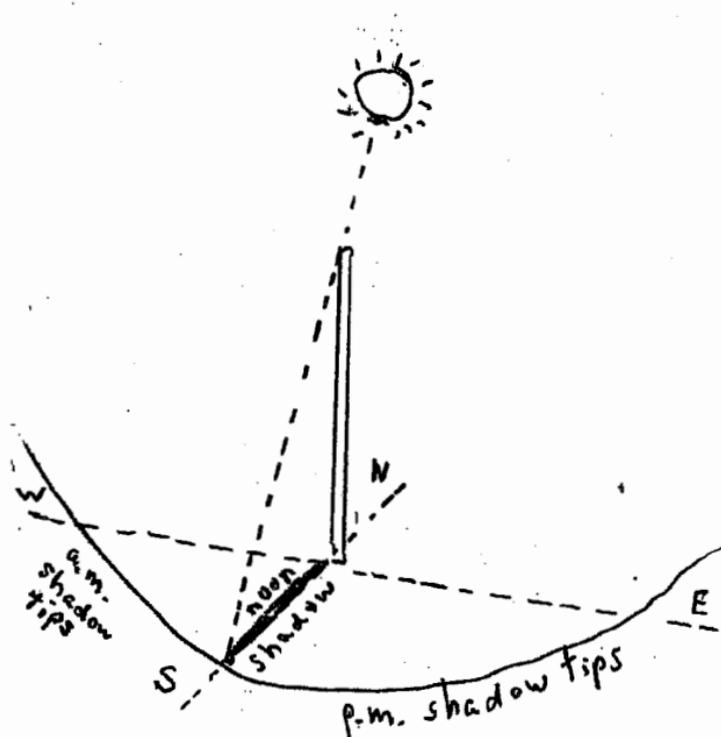
Jack and Jim's pencils quickly picked up speed.

Joe, however, gaped vacant-minded towards the openings, first at their feet and then at their heads. He let out an extended wail. "What'll I draw-aw-aw?"

Jack replied abruptly, but not unkindly. "Tent, fire-place, sun-clock." He did not add, "Of course," though he thought of it, but reminded himself that teachers should not be sarcastic even under provocation.

Jim grinned. "I'm *writing* about 'em. The fire-place first, cos it was me myself that did it. Then I'll draw 'em all as well — and without a bleat."

Jack started by ticking off his guesses of their walking times in a timing table prepared in advance in his Explorer's Log Book:-



Pegs at the end of the shadow show the time.

The shortest shadow is midday, 1200 local time, and roughly 1300 Daylight Saving Time on a clock. This midday shadow is an exact north-south line; at right angles to it is east-west, so the sun-clock is also a sun-compass.

In summer, the line of pegs curves gently more than half way round the stick; in winter it would curve away from the stick and be further from it; at the equinoxes in June and September it is an exact east-west straight line.

Pegs are better than pebbles because if they get kicked there is still a hole to mark the spot.

THE SUN-CLOCK

| PLACE | Hard/Easy | Timing | TIME ? |
|---------------------|-----------|---------|--------|
| Home | Easy | | 12.30 |
| Near Devil's Burrow | Easy | 15 min. | 12.45 |
| Top Devil's Burrow | Hard | 15 | 13.00 |
| Foot Jacob's Ladder | Very hard | 15 | 13.15 |
| To Campsite | Easy | 10 | 13.25 |
| Pitching tent | Easy | 30 | 13.55 |
| Swim | Easy | 30 | 14.25 |

Without a watch, he could scarcely criticize his own estimates. He went on to a written account:-

- We sang *Onward Christian soldiers* before going down the Devil's Burrow; it saved us from sliding to destruction.
- Pitched tent, built fireplace and sun-clock.
- Forgot Log Books till after swim, then did them, and nap.
- We are now setting out to explore the foot of the cliff.

He dashed off three sketches, which almost drew themselves, so often had he planned the tents and fireplaces of an explorer's camp.

He flopped back, shut his eyes tight, tried to doze but couldn't, let out a snore and a yawn, then yelled, "Well, I'm rested — and ready!"

Just fancy! So were his brothers. And the log books had not been painful. They copied Jack's antics with snores and yawns. All three sprang up, put on shirts and put notebooks and pencils in top left pockets.

The food must be stored against the roving hungry creatures: birds, animals, ants and flies. Jack and Jim hung the knapsack and the tucker bag on a limb of the nearest turpentine. It was in 100% shade.

Finally, Jack transferred a few First Aid items to his pockets and Jim re-tied the tent flaps — against rain.

They were ready.

Chapter 25

Surprise Finds in Paradise

THEY SET off, passed Grandfather Gum Tree and tramped towards the lower entrance.

Jack put Joe in the lead. "Turn left along the foot of the eastern cliff." Joe was only too happy to comply.

But he had to concentrate on his feet. He quoted, "Constant vigilance and eternal suspicion"! With 'trip rocks' everywhere in the coarse grass and small scrub, he dare not look up or about. It was slow going.

At the back of the line, Jim could let his eyes rove a bit. They spotted something at the top of a scree: "Look! a cave!" he cried.

They scrambled up, about five metres. Caves? Why, caves were their speciality. This one had no floor, just a slope of broken shards, grading from king-size to pipsqueaks, from wheelbarrows to footballs, down to coarse sand, which is the closest that broken rock gets to dust. This cave went in two metres, was about five metres wide, and at the back, the roof was only a metre high and sloped up to the front. So rain running down the outside would run in and drip.

Jack dismissed it: "Only good for cooking in rain."

Joe led off again. They found more caves, some with level floors, but spoiled by tunnels at the back.

"Dingo dens," opined Jim cheerfully.

Joe saw advantages. "We could catch 'em in cages made of *my* wire netting, an' tame 'em."

Walking so close to the foot of the cliff, they did not notice how it curved left. They stepped over a small gush of water coming from some hidden source in the rock. No wonder Paradise was well watered.

Jack reckoned, "This'd be another fork of our rivulet. We must've come round further than we thought. We're near the foot of Jacob's Ladder."

Almost at once they came on it. Unmistakable, Jim's secret stairs to the top, *his* Jacob's Ladder.

Jack gloomed. "Nothin' useful so far."

But Jim was quietly optimistic. "There's just gotta be another way to the top for the kangas to get in."

Joe supported him with an old homeschooling maxim. "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again."

Yes, Jack agreed about the kangaroos. "They'd never get up or down the Secret Stairs — I mean Jacob's Ladder — let alone the Devil's Burrow at the very top. An' the slippery stones at the lower entrance wouldn't let 'em hop — they can't walk, you know."

So they plugged on. Now the cliff was westering.

Then Joe found a really decent cave. He boasted, "My cave — we could live in it, if we had to."

Jim relished an awful possibility. "We might find the Shy Spy Triplets living in it. Then we could plant our staffs all round their sleeping heads."

Jack was stirred to argue. "I know what you're thinking of, but it might be us fleeing here from 'em."

Jim persisted. "We orta call it Saul's Cave."

Jack countered. "How about Elijah's Retreat?"

Joe gave a casting vote. "My cave's Elijah cos I like the way the ravens fed him from Achab's table."

This cave itself was big: four metres deep, at least six wide, a high roof of a metre and a half, with a level sandy floor. A minor disadvantage was it faced south.

Somewhat cheered, they plodded on. Sometimes they passed lesser caves, but refuges in rain.

Finally, they were round to the west of Grandfather Gum Tree. Jack pointed up — and their hopes rose.

For the last fifty metres, there had been stunted trees and big scrub above them. It could not cling on if the cliff was sheer. Yet it looked terribly steep. How far up did the growth go?

Joe spotted the vital clue, something his brothers missed, a faint path between two turpentine, wide enough for boys, wide enough for a big kangaroo.

He plunged in, turned right and vanished. He called back in triumph in the slang of explorers and rock climbers, "She goes!"

Jack and Jim shrugged, their eyes met, and they plunged in, too. Hope rose again — a hidden way up?

Joe romped upward, fast, on a rough rocky pathway. It headed north, back the direction they came. All the time it snaked, a little left or right, even briefly down.

So uneven was it underfoot, Joe called back, "It's trying to sprain me ankles."

Paradise, camouflaged grey-green in the tree tops, was hidden down below at the foot of their steep slope.

Above, on their left, clinging forlornly to the upper cliff, were lesser trees and lots more scrub.

Jack and Jim were amazed. Fancy Joe finding this!

Some of the broken rocks were as big as motor cars, others as small as armchairs, grading right down to pumpkins. Most were veiled by a coverlet of grass, scrub or moss. Maybe it was what held it all together?

Jack was in his element. "This is an old animal pad. Since it goes as far as this, it must go to the top." He couldn't resist using one of Dad's psychological gems. "Behaviour is purposive, human or animal."

Joe slowed enough to let them catch up. He snorted, proud of his ignorance of psychology, both human and animal. "Sike! bah!"

Jim showed off his bush jargon from the books.

"It's not so much a path as a negotiable route."

As they rose higher, they got an occasional glimpse of Paradise Pool, but not their tent, hidden in the trees.

Triumphantly, from only a few metres ahead, Joe called, "I'm at the top — and there's a Big Surprise!"

There sure was! They came out on a level stretch of smooth rock. "We'll rest here," Joe ordered.

Jack and Jim closed up. They needed a spell and the view was...

"Unreal!" gasped Jim, "It's really unreal!"

This offended Jack's logical mind, but he had the wisdom to let it pass.

It looked like a road of solid rock, and barely three metres wide. Beyond it, it seemed to fall into an abyss, and level with them, across the abyss, it was only twenty metres through 'thin air' to a facing cliff!

"Play it safe," Jack bade them "On yer tummies."

Prostrate, they poked their heads over the drop.

Jack gasped. "See the trees down there! It's Cubby's Canyon!"

It took time to adjust this new discovery to their mental maps of where they had already been.

Jim pondered, then spoke slowly. "In that case, I don't think there's any path from this side to the bottom, or we'd see it from up here."

Cautiously, they got to their feet and looked the other way, to the east. However, on that side, the fringing trees, through which their path had wended its crooked route upward, blocked the view. It was all an avalanche of rocks and scrub.

Jim continued. "Fancy. Paradise is somewhere down there, but these scrubby trees hide everything."

"Just as well," grunted Jack. "We don't want every odd-bod — like the SST — to see it. Oh, and there

must be high ground on its far side. Remember, when we made that round trip from Thunderfall to Tumbledown twelve days ago?" Jack muttered most of this to himself as much as to his brothers.

As usual, Joe demanded action. "Oh, let's *do* something — explore where *my* causeway goes to."

"We've gotta get back to our camp to cook tea for an early night," his biggest brother pointed out.

Jim added with foresight, "Well, we've found a safe way up, so we'd better find where we start on it from home."

"No need," countered Jack. "We'll come home this way tomorrow. Let's call it the Giant's Causeway and mark this spot where we cut off down to our camp. But tonight, we've gotta cook a meal and get to bed early, for an extra early start. It's a big day tomorrow."

He would not allow them to make a cairn of stones. "Someone might chuck 'em over and kill us or another group coming up Cubby's Canyon."

So Jim scratched an arrow with the spike of their knife *on the side nearest the Canyon*. It did not point to their path, but to the canyon. Such little deceptions by conservationist bushwalkers are in the best books...

Jack understood. "Jacob," he said admiringly, "the wily Bedouin." Jim took it as a compliment.

Going down was hard in a different way. "Any slip was death..." recited Jim. With relish, he added, "Or a bad bust up." It made them think of sprains and scrapes and bleeds and even broken bones... So they did not hurry.

At the bottom, the pool was hidden by trees. They cut across in its general direction. An animal pad confirmed their mental map. It was criss-crossed by others, but surely, all must lead to or from the water.

Joe now found time to talk. "I'll call it Joseph's Dream," he muttered, "yo ho yep yes I will. I think I must have dreamt all this last night."

His brothers did not bother to challenge him. Jack simply agreed. "Okay, let's call it Joseph's Dream that got him out of Pharaoh's gaol."

* * * *

"How about another swim, Jack?" urged Joe.

Jack grinned. "As long as we get the meal started first."

Jim volunteered at once. "Bags me peeling spuds."

Joe put in his bid. "I'll light the fire and put the billies on. I've been called a pyrotechnic, you know."

"Pyromaniac, you mean," grunted Jack, "and don't be." He slapped yet another mosquito. "Just as well Nanna told us about that Citronella stuff."

Jim grinned. "Dad would've let the mossies nibble us to death, so we'd discover Citronella for ourselves."

Jack sliced onions and poked sausages. He put six in the big dixie with a little water. Later, he'd do the other six. The small dixie was needed to boil spuds, then the spinach put on top. Lastly, the onions would fry and be given a mush of gravy and more water.

* * * *

It was a great swim and a great main course, with impressive team work, insatiable appetites, unceasing chatter. "From now on," Jack told Jim and Joe, "we've gotta put all our visitors to bushy tests in advance."

"What do yer mean?" challenged Jim.

"You orta know," Jack chided him. "You pinched it from my log book last night." He quoted the famous scene in *Tom Sawyer* about painting the fence. "To get men and boys do something, you've only gotta pretend it's difficult. If you say, 'You couldn't use a bow saw,'

they'll do it all day long, just to show you."

This example, he reflected, might well be tried on their visitors, and to the benefit of everyone.

Jim thought that testing others would be fun. "How about a hippo-bumpo fight? Riders branding the other riders and their horses with tennis balls? The twins'll lend us tennis balls... And the most hits wins."

Joe saw a chance to show off. "I know," he told them. "Can any of your visitors turn better somersaults than me? I can turn a double one in the water, nearly."

Jack seized on this. "We might try a bushy version of it, like climbing the rope in the old gym. If you can't do that, you can't come bush."

Jim was agreeable. "Okay then. And chuck'em in the creek as well — see if they can take it?" Oh, how hard it is for boys to give up horseplay...

Jack admitted, "That's what Uncle Wal's scouts did. But better we DON'T do to them what we don't do to ourselves. You agreed to that before, and so does Dad."

"Fancy you talking!" objected Jim. "What about dumping Mick, Rick and Phil in the horse trough? That was *your* idea, Jack."

Jack was unfazed. "Quite different. They were rude and crude. Mum would have washed their mouths out with soap. Dad would have spanked them. Nanna would've done both."

Jim smiled. "Okay. Let's do your idea. Meet 'em at the station. Walk 'em home at a great pace."

It was certainly a practical test.

"You've got it at last," replied his patient brother. "And they won't know it's a secret test."

While this agreement was negotiated, they boiled water, mixed in a thick mush of powered milk, then a mush of custard powder and sugar. They stirred gently

and it soon thickened into custard. They ate it with sultanas sprinkled in. "Spotted dog," Joe called it.

Before they went to bed, Jack boiled more water to soak the oats for breakfast. Then, against mosquitoes, he got them to rub on Citronella. Meanwhile Jim spread the blankets, with Joe's in the middle.

Joe was nervy for his first night ever in a tent and away from home. Jack told a soothing story he got from Greg: "When they had Cuthbert in a tent, it poured rain and they all felt safe from the kidnappers."

They forgot their prayers and slept at once — except that Joe slept only lightly at first. He woke yet again, but did not know why. Jack and Jim slept on.

Joe had just dozed again. Then he heard groaning noises — close! too close! just outside the tent...

They got louder: Groan, Groan, **Groan, GROAN.**

He had no need to wake the others. The noises woke them. All three sat up in alarm.

Jack turned on the torch. Even Jim looked frightened. Joe clung to Jack. Faces were blanched pale in the torchlight — and in Fear.

There was a long ominous creaking squeak. It squeak grew to a SHRIEK... loud wrenching noises as well as groans, like a man torn apart in torture. The air was full of creepy feelings, their necks prickled.

It all got louder and louder — and more terrible.

Groan, Groan, GROAN, GROAN! Squeak, Squeak, SQUEAK, SQUEAK! SNAP! SNAP! **BANG-BANG!**
Swish Swish SWISH SWISH!

The SWISH was long and drawn out. Would it never end? An ominous whistling, going on for ever...

What next? Well, they felt it first. The very ground beneath them seemed to heave and thump them hard.

Their hair stood on end! Their skin prickled.



THE TREE JACK WOULD NOT LET THEM CAMP UNDER

A bare moment later — terrifying in the torch light. Then **THUMP-BANG-CRASH!** the sound trailed behind the thump by a merest whisker of time.

The **THUMP-BANG-CRASH** seemed to go on for ever. Maybe five seconds. Dwindling echoes from the nearby cliffs dragged it out. Then, a great silence.

It was followed by scampering noises, a scurrying of little animals that dwindled into distance and silence.

Inside the tent, three hearts thumped, three hearts raced, thumped and raced fit to shake them off their mountings. Only their ribs kept their hearts engaged...

Jack scrambled outside with the torch.

Jim's voice was tremulous. "Is... it... an... earth... quake...?"

Jack always got a bit cheerier in disasters. "Whacky-doodle-doo! Come out and 'ave a geek!"

Jim and Joe scampered out — still holding hands...

A tree, huge by Boxwatch standards, though medium for Paradise, lay prostrate. Its roots stuck up, all-torn which-ways, ripped out of the earth.

It was the tree Jack would not let them camp under. It had fallen exactly where their tent would have been.

"Whacky-doo! It missed us, thank Heavens," cried a horrified Jim, yet not thinking to thank Jack as Heaven's agent who had saved them from certain death.

Jack shook his head ruefully. "It's whacky-doodle-doo all right. We've got a lot to be thankful for."

Joe added piously, "It's the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil." Then, on its size — he was quite candid: "It's as thick as Old Mistry at the St Vincent de Paul Shop — and he's shaped like a barrel."

Jack was his old self once more. "Just as well it happened tonight — without Ben, Ken and Steve!"