

Chapter 15

Boxwatch at Big Bogie

JACK, JIM AND JOE had high hopes for Mick, Rick and Phil. Surely they would prove sturdier bushies than cousins Simon and Dominic. With cool weather, oh! what a day it should be.

Deep sleep had refreshed them and they rose early. The Lawsons knelt for a morning prayer. So did Mick, Rick and Phil — perhaps for the first time in their lives.

In the Old Laundry, they splashed a bit of water from tin basins on faces and hands, just enough to towel off, and came back to dress for the great bush expedition.

For the morning jobs, each visitor was paired off with a local. Being Saturday, there was no laundry, so they did not need to light the coppers.

In the kitchen, breakfast followed family prayers.

Mick's mother, with consideration for the Lawson finances, had kindly sent a couple of kilos of bacon. Bacon, with eggs on golden toast, was a welcome luxury after the porridge, hot milk and raw sugar. And all washed down with lots of tea.

The prattle of the littlies was a new experience for the boys from small families. Tommy told them, "Me and Joe's chooks are very clever. Do you know that new chooks take one look at a perch and they *know* it's for them to sleep on?"

Mick good naturedly played up to him. "You mean without you teaching 'em?" Tommy nodded.

Tilly added, "Our chooks've got springs in their legs. They jump like kangaroos and land on the perch."

Joe, the chook-master, was also Joe the Smarty. He boasted, "I've got springs too but they're called muscles."

On Saturdays, breakfast was washed up at once. Mick wielded the washing-up mop, Rick and Phil the tea towels. Joe stacked plates and cups in their places, and Jack and Jim organized the food for a bush lunch.

"You really ought to get a dish-washer," growled Phil. "You know, get with it, get modern." For him, *Terra Sancta* was hopelessly old-fashioned and out-of-date. It did not dawn on him it might be advantageous.

Jim said, "A solar panel's too small for a dish-washer."

Meanwhile, the two knapsacks were on the kitchen table, Jack's for Lawsons and Mick's for visitors. Jack and Jim found a mobile phone in Mick's knapsack. They were too ignorant to recognize its wizardry — for good and evil. Loud enough to be heard, Jack hissed, "Contraband! Will we chuck it in the creek?"

"You bet," chortled Jim, "and him who brung it."

Mick blushed. He knew he was guilty.

However, the Lawsons were pleased that the visitors had all the essential items on their lists: bush hats with broad brims, shirts with collars to turn up against the sun and sleeves that rolled up or down, roomy knee-length walking shorts, thick socks, and light but solid footwear — all comfortable and practical and safe.

Each had a parka, counting as jumper and raincoat, a sensible extra if the fine weather went to bits.

With a faint grin, Jack confessed — "I misjudged your mums," he told Mick, Rick and Phil. "I thought they'd make you bring lots of useless extras." Maybe Simon and Dominic had given them good advice.

Jim backed this up. "It's stupid carrying what we won't use. Gotta save all our energy for walking."

Jack added shrewdly, "If a boy conks out, he'll be heavy enough to carry, without waste weight, you know, like towels, and they're even heavier wet."



"CONTRABAND! WILL WE CHUCK IT IN THE CREEK?"

Mick was sharing his knapsack and a pocket knife with Rick and Phil. He had a crash helmet buckled on and denounced it himself. "It's sissy, but Mum made me bring it... I'll leave it here at *Terra Sancta*."

The Lawsons nodded their sympathy.

Jack and Jim spread the food and gear over the two knapsacks: plastic bags of tea, sugar, milk powder, salt, and two dozen Anzac biscuits, a dozen home-baked bread rolls; a dozen sausages in grease-proof paper and butcher's paper; plastic jars of butter, apricot jam and tomato sauce; an old three litre plastic bottle of water; a plastic bag for the brand new dixies, a billy, six mugs, one spoon; and, roaming on the loose, twelve oranges and six apples. Matches were in protective tins in their shorts' pockets.

"What about forks?" asked Mick.

Jim explained, "We sharpen sticks to poke holes in the snags¹ and eat 'em on a bread roll."

Jack added, "We've two pocket knives for butter."

Joe made the absence of cutlery even clearer. "Outdoors, we mostly eat with our front trotters."

* * * *

The visitors realized that the Lawsons simple wisdom of early rising, even on Saturday, meant more time free for adventuring.

Mick accepted it cheerfully. "At this time of *night* I'm usually snoring. This *is* much better."

At half past seven, after a cheery 'Godspeed' from the grown-ups and smiles from the rest of the family, the six boys were on their way.

Crossing the home paddock, they strode in line-abreast. There was lots of talk and banter.

1 snags: colloquial for sausages.

Phil walked between Buttercup and her calf Bubs. It was Bubs, not Buttercup, who took exception to this. She butted him. Cowboy Jim spoke severely to Bubs and told Phil, "You see, he's a bull calf and has to get into practice at defending cows."

At the sliprails, the four without knapsacks, climbed through, and Jack and Mick over the top.

Rick got a splinter from the old timber of the second rail. Jack told him, "Suck it and spit." It still hurt a bit and bled. Rick made his customary 'cuss' words.

Jim reproved him. "I orta punch your nose."

Jack spoke calmly, as his Dad would. "Sounds a bit like the Holy Name — better to say, 'Whacky-doo'."

Rick asked, "Can I say, 'Sneeze, snoozle and snot'?"

"Not if Mum's listenin'," cheeped Joe. "She says 'snot' is rude and crude." His brothers grinned.

The timber track was too narrow for six abreast. So, still talking non-stop, they regrouped in twos.

The new boys made staffs from fallen sticks.

They did not notice the bewildering forking and joining in the track. As yet, they felt neither wonderment nor anxiety. They did not notice that Jack chose the way by favouring the top of the ridge.

At The Tumbledown, with lots of gestures, Joe gave a vivid description of Jack racing the Land Rover down it without brakes. The path smashed through the passion fruit confirmed his account. They stopped for some guzzling, to top up on breakfast.

After that, Jack turned off sharp right and swung onto Koala Spur. It was uphill at first, and this quite confused the visitors. Indeed, it dismayed them.

Phil was put out: "Why go uphill when we've only just come down hill? Have you been here before?"

Mick challenged Jack even more bluntly. "Do you

really know where you're going, or are you guessing? There's no track. *How* can you possibly *know*?"

Rick was suspicious. "Have you ever got lost?"

Jim replied cheekily, "Only slightly slewed for a day or two... oops! I mean half an hour or so."

When the rise levelled off, with trees all round, and no distant or even local view, the visitors doubts grew to mutinous mutterings. How could anyone keep on course? It was reckless. Were the Bush Boy Explorers just hoping for the best? But what if the worst happened? And they wandered in circles for days? And the food ran out? And nowhere to sleep?

Jack did, in fact, swing too far to the right. Then he saw that the ground was starting to slope down. He could tell the difference between the steeper slope of the side of a ridge and the gentler slope on the ridge's back. He mended his error with a sharp turn to the left. To the doubting Thomases, this proved he was muddled.

Now he pointed to a cairn of stones. "We made it when we came up" — he pointed even further to the right — "over there." It was too much for his critics.

The forest thinned as the ridge sloped. Now they could see, in the middle distance, the gorge of Koala Creek on their right and a side creek on the left. But the vastness of the wild bush was scary.

Near the end of the slope, Joe yelled, "Big Bogie!" and the Lawsons began to pick up sticks and snatch kindling thinner-than-matches off dead wattle branches.

Jack explained, "It's not for today but for a big stockpile of wood for the next time." His familiarity with local conditions should have been reassuring. But the visitors now viewed even that with suspicion. Nevertheless they took the hint and helped collect wood.

Then Joe, who was in front, and yapping at those

behind him, almost trod on a tiger snake sprawled across their faint track. Joe went one way, the snake another. That was not reassuring either...

Joe continued to yap. He told the Boxwatch boys. "It's probably a relative of the one I stomped to death — yo ho yep yes I did, and it went deady bones. When we came back the same way, it was gone.

"Proves it wasn't dead," crowed Phil.

"Oh yes it was," rejoined Joe. "My goanna Go-Go probly got a bush signal to come and eat him, or the kookaburras pulled him to bits." With that, he led the way down a defile in the low cliff. Hugging their bundles of sticks, they slithered on the loose stones.

Mick, Rick and Phil were 'all shook oop' by their experiences so far. But now for the reward — pure and simple joy at nature's swimming pool, and how it wrapped round from the side creek into the main creek.

They admired the cave and begged for a long rest.

This put Jack in a quandary. He had not planned to stop here. "What d'yer reckon, Jim?"

Mick interrupted. "Rest! We rest, or go on strike!"

Jack bit his lip and accepted the inevitable. If a group needed urging on the way out... change the plan.

Jim set up the old fireplace from the blackened stones. Jack broke up kindling and sticks. As a kindness, he let clumsy Mick strike the match.

Joe filled the billy and hung it on a stick over the flames. Jack got out the light rope and tied it between the sticks that Greg Cumberland had jammed in cracks.

"What's that for?" asked Phil.

Joe told him, "Air our clothes while swimming."

At the word 'swimming', the visitors cheered up.

The Lawsons flopped down on the rock floor. Jim explained, "Get boots off while we're cooling down."

Phil protested, "But we're not hot or panting."

With the superior wisdom of bushy boy, Jack said, "Just long enough for pulses and breathing to slow."

Then Jim yelled, "Okay, beat yers in!"

Clothes were reefed off and dumped — so much for hanging them up. Jack, Jim and Joe were ready first. At once they bombed in, in one great awkward SPLASH.

What with shyness and tight fitting clothes, Mick, Rick and Phil were slow undressing. But they sprinted to the edge, made the most graceful shallow dives along the surface, and fairly zipped across the pool.

Half-way over, they overtook the Lawsons, turned about on the far side and raced back. They could swim! The poor Lawsons pursued them like wounded whales.

* * * *

Gone were their needless fears. The rough grandeur of The Mighty Bush worked its enchantment on the Boxwatch boys. This rockbound pool, cradled in deep bush gorges, was beauty beyond all imagining, indeed a blend of many beauties, of sight, sound and smell.

Ridges rose high under a sky of cloudless blue. Sunlit leaves glistened green, shadowed leaves green-grey.

The boys swam to and fro amid dancing wavelets. The cold water sparkled clear and clean and felt as smooth as silk — no chlorine and no pollution. Troubled spirits were soothed by a gentle sun not fierce enough to burn. It was so peaceful — they began to warble in delight.

Dimly, they realized they could also hear the silence — a silence so gently broken by murmurs of moving water, and little buzzings, chirps and cheeps. A faint scent of honey-wattle wafted on the gently moving air, plus the homely smell of wood smoke.

Maybe they thought vaguely of their Creator.

Maybe they heard whispers of a still small voice which hinted that *they* were streaked with an ugliness out of tune with all this beauty. Maybe they marvelled at Jack, Jim and Joe, as wild as boys mostly are, but clean-minded, kind-hearted more than most, and radiating a noble something in tune with the beauty all about.

Meanwhile Jack was thinking of a new and less demanding plan. Now he called, "All out!"

As they waded ashore, the visitors realized there was beauty even in the fire. Its wreathing flames softening the ugliness even of a battered black billy.

Joe boasted, "It's just a week and a bit that we taught ourselves to swim."

The boys stood a moment in the warm sunshine, but the gentle breeze proved cold on wet skin. They moved closer to the fire, and fed it with more sticks. Its pleasant glow felt even better than the sun.

What with each visitor taking a turn on their knapsack, they were converted to saving weight. The Lawsons were proved right: they did not need towels.

Dried and dressed, they sipped tea and chewed Anzac biscuits, and enjoyed the friendliness.

Jack was pleased they asked for more tea. The billy was boiled again. Soon they would ascend a waterless ridge, with no more tea till lunch. The water in the plastic bottle was only for boys 'conking out'.

Jack glanced up at the sun. "It's quarter past nine."

Phil bleated, "*You* wouldn't let us bring a watch."

Jack used one of Dad's teaching tricks: he simply ignored the protest and trumped it with something grander. "Now it's time to go where we've never been before."

To scare them as a tease, Jim embellished it: "And maybe no one else has ever been or will be."

Joe was already rinsing mugs and packing food and

gear back into knapsacks. It counted as his share of carrying it, since Jim and Jack had agreed to spare him.

They crossed the stepping-rocks to the east bank of the side creek, skirted under a cliff, crossed the second set of stones over Koala Creek, and headed obliquely downstream but along a rising track on the right bank.

"Someone made this track," Phil objected cheekily, "so man *has* been here." His remark was ignored.

As the track rose, it veered from the creek, which was lost to sight behind rock and scrub and small trees.

Jack was looking carefully to the right, watching for the foot of a ridge. When their track levelled, he turned sharply right. He told them, "We'll explore this ridge instead of Mount Zodiac. Most of the way, we should get a view into the gorge of Koala Creek. We should be able to find the climb-down we used coming the other way and get to The Secret Water."

Jim approved. "It'll be a bit more for our map."

"And," gloated Joe, "we'll spot any Shy Spy Triplets around here without 'em knowing, yo ho yep yes!"

To impress his brothers as well as the visitors, he continued, "Lieutenant General Robert Baden-Powell reckoned civilized people rarely look up, so the Shy Spy Triplets won't." Hmmm thought the others!

Jack, their masterful leader, warned them, "From now on, everyone'd better talk in whispers."

Phil was the first whisperer. "There's a track here."

Jim took this as a criticism of his 'no man has ever been before'. "Huh! he said, "It's just an animal pad."

Jack put Phil in front to shut him up, then Joe and himself, Mick and Rick. Trusty Jim was rear-guard, lest anyone drop out. Jim never complained at this menial yet vital task.

Chapter 16

Up the Ridge and Down Again

ALTHOUGH Phil was in front, it was Joe who hissed, "Heap of stones," and pointed.

Jack hissed back, "Yes, Greg told us he'd built a cairn — if you'd only listened. Keep going, Phil."

The track ceased at the cairn, and the ridge rose sharply. They dodged around the obstacles — cliffs and thick scrub. Where dodging was impossible, they picked the easiest way, clambering up or hacking through.

The ascent proved easier than Jack expected. There were no dangerous cliff-climbs, just a few steep scrambles, and no tricky navigational bits like saddles.

The Lawson legs went up and down like pistons, without conscious effort. The visitors were not as robust, and hufferty-puffed even without the cruelty of a blistering hot day. Staffs helped in uphill plodding.

After ten minutes, the steepness eased off. Now there were big boulders to dodge. Sometimes Joe broke ranks and cut round the other side, "Just to show 'em."

Jack wished he wouldn't but didn't say so. He was telling himself, "I mustn't be like a bossy boots girl."

"Our view's bettering all the time," claimed Jim, "and better than seeing it from a low flying plane, going too fast to take in the detail."

Mick looked down. "Those pools look beaut," he enthused. "That bushy swim was beaut."

The Big Bogie Pool, from which they had started the climb, lay far behind. And its cave, of course, was out of sight around the corner in the side creek.

Jack had to keep reminding them, "Don't yap so loudly, or the Shy Spy Triplets might hear you."

Dodging round trees and scrub and boulders, they were getting glimpses close ahead of The Thunderfall. The sun flashed and gleamed on its wild waters.

The Lawsons greeted it like an old friend.

Mick doubted it: "Have you really been there before?"

Joe pointed across the gorge to the horizon, and hissed, "Look! the Roof Room on *Terra Sancta*. So there! We know exactly where we are."

"And see Cubby's Canyon," added Jim. "It's in line with it." The great knife cut in the north side of the gorge pointed homeward, but its cave was hidden.

By the time The Thunderfall lay below them, they could see further ahead, to The Secret Water.

Rick pointed at it excitedly — and had to be SSSshed — "There's someone there! pitching a tent!"

Jack grinned to himself: he had already spotted it, but waited for someone else to see it first.

Jim's keen eyes took in vital detail: "Three boys!" he crowed to Mick, Rick and Phil. "Just like we said."

Jack himself quivered with excitement. "The Shy Spy Triplets! See their straw hats!"

A chuckling Jim rebuked Jack: "SSssh, little boy!"

Lest the visitors had forgotten, Joe reminded them. "We told you about our rivals, yo ho yep yes we did!"

Mick enquired mildly, "What's the rivalry about?"

It was a good question. But no Lawson had an answer, and they felt a bit silly.

Jack dodged it. "When we make our own tent, it'll be khaki-green," he averred, "not orange like theirs: it's meant to attract the attention of rescuers." This might have been good as a campfire debating topic but of no consequence at the moment.

"What'll we *do* about it, Jack?" asked practical Jim.

The others looked at their leader. He enjoyed the

trust of brothers, visitors, and, although he only vaguely aware of it, of his and their fathers and mothers.

Jack pondered. "How about this?" Like his Dad, his leadership style was more by making suggestions plus consultation than giving direct orders. "Here's our chance to find out what they're up to."

Jim said, "So we climb down to The Secret Water and listen to them?"

"It would be safer to keep us all together," admitted Jack. "But six are more likely to roll a rock by mistake and alert them. So how about Jim and Rick be our spies? They can climb down above The Secret Water where we got down last Saturday. The rest of us'll back-track along the ridge and find a way down to The Thunderfall and we'll all meet there for lunch."

"Will you start cookin' it?" asked Jim.

"Of course," agreed Jack. As an after thought, he added, "But no swimmin' till we're all together." The he told Phil. "Pull up under that turp." He had to keep pointing at it because, for Rick, a tree was just a tree and lacked any individuality.

At the turpentine tree, Jim said, "This is where Simon nearly fainted last Saturday, and see where Joe buried the orange skins." That reminded them to eat an apple and suck out an orange each, and Garbo-Master Jim buried them next last week's lot.

Then Jack told Jim. "We'll split the food. In my knapsack we'll take the water, First Aid Kit, billy, grid iron and sausages, anything to be cooked. Mick, could you let Jim have your knapsack for most of the fruit?"

He led them forward to last Saturday's jutting headland of rock. He pointed silently at the enticing view of The Secret Water and three busy boys.

Sight or sound could easily betray their presence,

especially when their own spies got closer. Even now, the scattered trees on the ridge crest left them in full view. A single dislodged stone might be heard.

With a whispered "Godspeed" from Jack, the counter-spies slid over the edge, to begin clambering down the multi-stepped cliff.

Jack beckoned his team back to the turpentines, then turned east to retrace their way along the ridge. He put Joe in front. Soon they were above a likely spot to get down to The Thunderfall. It was a shallow gully sloping steeply into the gorge. Once in it, they were not visible against a skyline, nor was it so deep as to block out the view to left and right.

Upstream, they glimpsed Jim and Rick on even steeper slopes, clinging to saplings. But they could not *coo-ee* lest the Shy Spies at Secret Water hear it.

They gasped when the boy in front tottered forward in a half run to the next cliff top. Right on the brink, he snatched at a small tree, swung right round on it, out into space and back in again. It saved him from following his staff, which went flying over and down...

Mick and Phil heard Jack mutter, "Hope Rick hasn't dislocated his arm — I dunno the First Aid for it."

Joe grinned. "You're only worried cos he dropped his staff — but better than goin' over huggin' it."

Jack's group soon had similar problems, for they had Mick... A great mate given to accidents. Not for nothing did his Mum made him wear a crash helmet on those visits to the Lawsons in Boxwatch. Phil, on the other hand, proved that his prowess at school work was transferable and he helped curb Mick's recklessness.

Mick soon had to swing out on a sapling himself, and spin right round. Jack remarked dryly, "Your Mum'd've a fit if she knew you weren't in your helmet."

In one place they needed the rope. They put it round a tree and used it in two halves, to steady their descent down a steeply sloping rock. Jack and Joe went first and Mick last. Mick let go one rope so he fell thumpetty-thump. He banged his head on a tree. Jack made him lie down with his head up, lest he had concussion. Oh for the crash helmet!

While Jack recoiled the rope, putting in 'the twist', Joe examined Mick's head — it was disappointing: "No blood! Only a lump like my chooks' eggs!" Hmmm!

They retrieved Mick's staff, needed to avoid sliding on the loose stones on the slopes below the cliffs.

Near the bottom, Mick came another 'gutzer'. This time it was cuts, scratches and bruises.

He now had a lump on the head, a bleeding cut on the back of a hand, abrasions on both knees, and a bruise on his left cheek. Phil was a tower of strength — and inventiveness. He fished in Mick's right-side pocket, got out his hanky, and bandaged up the hand.

Joe was all admiration. "Even Jack couldn't've done it better." That was his highest praise.

Jack gave a sigh of relief when they arrived on the floor of the gorge near the top of the waterfall. The scramble beside it down to the pool was 'a snack'.

Mick and Phil were mightily impressed at a close up view of all this falling water and its thunder. They had no previous acquaintance with nature's wonders other than virtual reality, which is not the same at all.

They hankered for a dip, but Jack insisted, "Everyone helps get lunch — fireplace, firewood, light a fire, fill the billy, hang it in the flames, load the gridiron with sausages, poke holes, grill them, butter the rolls, milk and sugar the mugs." Shared work, great fun!

MEANWHILE Jim and Rick were making progress well worthy of report to Jack and the others.

Rick was as accident-prone as his cousin. After saving himself from the cliff plunge, Jim took preventative measures and went in front himself.

Rick was not used to steep hillsides. He set a large rock rolling. Jim heard it coming and skipped aside — just in time to miss a grave injury or instant death. The rock rolled on, crashing and banging as it picked up speed.

Jim saw the Shy Spy Triplets start to turn. In the next half-second they would look up. He hissed fiercely, "Get down! git down! g' down! an' keep still!"

What would the Shy Spies make of it? Would they conclude that someone was on the hillside? and be on their guard? or would they think it natural?

Jim waited a full minute before taking a careful peep. The Triplets were busily unpacking three knapsacks and stowing stuff in a tent. He hissed to Rick: "Three sleeping bags — they're sleeping here tonight."

Rick asked, "Are you sure they're sleeping bags?"

Jim grinned: "Shape plus size equals sleepin' bag."

At the bottom of that terrible descent, next its screening trees, they lost sight of The Secret Water. Poor Rick was beset with doubts. He needed reassurance it was still really there.

The gurgling water hid Rick's little noises. It also hindered hearing what the Shy Spies were saying. Jim hissed, "I'll get closer. You wait here." He could move much more quietly than Rick.

Hidden by a fringe of foliage, he peeped across the pool. The Shy Spy Triplets were packing things into a single knapsack. He must get closer to see and hear.

How? He slithered back to Rick. "You'll have to wait a bit longer," he hissed. Back in the scrub, he



"I'D HATE TO BE EAVES-DROPPED ON"

crossed the creek, climbed the Morton Bay fig tree on its blind side, and crawled along a branch as thick as a fair sized tree. The shading leaves hid him.

They had lit no fire... no smoke to make him cough. He was almost above them *and could hear everything*. Like a dull toothache, his still small voice nagged at this shameless eavesdropping. Was it justified by what he heard? He told himself, "All's fair in love and war."

What if they looked up — as they always seemed to do with tree trunks? They'd see him for sure...

The smaller boy, the one Greg and Bernie had called Meshach, was saying, "We've diddled those Lawsons."

Shadrach sounded ashamed. "*I'd hate to be eavesdropped on like we were doing accidentally when Greg and Bernie met those Lawsons in that canyon.*"

Jim blushed with shame. His was a deliberate act, *and* the Shy Spy Triplets had heard all that the Lawsons knew or guessed about them! And he and Jack were wrong in thinking that *the SST were spying on them!*

Shadrach went on, "The Lawsons haven't seen us since. They'll think we've given up the bush and so *they won't spy on us anymore*. And we'll be like the Hebrew scouts, spying out Canaan before moving in."

Abednego, the third triplet, said, "It doesn't matter that Greg and Bernie found us here on Thursday. We didn't let on anything, not even how we got here."

Jim's head spun. They did not know they had been seen by the gate of *Terra Sancta* that day, nor that Greg guessed they came in from the west, nor that they had been seen yesterday at The Thunderfall.

Shadrach wound things up. "Everything's ready for us to camp here from tomorrow arvo. We'll be able to get on with our job, without going near them."

Meshach nagged his brother. "Let's get back to the

pool at the ladder. We haven't swum in it yet and we're going to have lunch there and I'm jolly hungry." With that, they plunged off into the scrubby north bank.

Would they run into the girls at Little Bogie?

Jim hurried back to Rick to find him full of anxiety. Rick blushed. "I thought you'd been kidnapped or you fell down a bottomless pit or they'd drowned you."

Jim snorted — in a whisper. "We don't let things like that happen to us." So they scurried off downstream on the south bank, to meet up with the others.

* * * *

Rick gazed on The Thunderfall with simple delight. He put a twist on a well-known poem: "Her beauty and her terror, the green-grey land for me."

Indeed, all three visitors were humbled in the face of such rugged beauty, the sort of beauty a boy needs. And the fearful descents they had made into the gorge of Koala Creek enhanced it further.

Jack, Joe, Mick and Phil had eight sausages cooked and four nearly cooked, and the billy simmering at the edge of the fire. Jim brewed the tea — and poor Rick, babbling in his delight, managed to trip and knock it over! He let fly with an Australian curse on the billy.

Jim simply held his tongue. Again, Jack sighed deeply. No doubt about it, being a leader was hard. In fact, his brothers were impressed at his restraint.

Phil speared the last four sausages on a stick and upended the fat straight into the flames. WHOOF! The others smelt that horrible stench of singeing hair...

The Boxwatch boys got a further surprise when even outdoors the Lawsons said Grace before Meals, just as though under a parental eye back at *Terra Sancta*.

It was hard to break a bad habit. Rick let loose a snigger. Jack told him, quietly, kindly, firmly that next

time the Lawsons would chuck him in, a threat better than any dose of Christian doctrine against profanity and obscene speech. Rick repented with a blush.

Two 'snags' per bread roll plus salt and sauce were yummy. They drank lots of tea and the billy was boiled anew. They ate their second rolls with jam and butter.

Jim related word-for-word all he had overheard.

At first, Jack was shocked at such blatant eaves-dropping — as ashamed as Jim had been of himself at the time. However, when he heard more, he judged, "Dad'd probably allow it — but not Mum."

All the Lawsons chuckled at a week of mutual misunderstandings. Both they and the mysterious Triplets thought they were being spied on by each other.

Nevertheless, the Lawsons were still stuck with the puzzle — what were the Triplets up to? And how could they find out, honourably?

But the pool was calling, even straight after eating. Jack pointed to the ledge on which the falls thundered. "That rock's not slippery slimy so we can shower on it. It'll fudge a bit on the fasting time before a swim."

So they hung up clothes on a rope between trees.

After a minute under the Falls, Mick slid off into the pool. Later, he explained that he must escape the deluge — or drown. The others followed at once, with gliding dives if skill allowed or jumping in if it did not.

Jim voiced their excuse. "It's so shallow that any cramps early after lunch wouldn't matter." Hmmpf!

When drying and dressing, Mick found his bandage had slipped off. "It doesn't matter," he declared, "I can blow my nose on my shirt sleeve." More hmmpf!

They soused the fire and moved off upstream.

Chapter 17

Boxwatch makes Good

THE BOXWATCH BOYS were eager to see the fabled Cubby's Cave. It would be a consolation prize for not getting to Mount Zodiac.

This suited Jack. He had his own reasons for getting home early, and Cubby's Canyon was an easy way out of the gorge. Also, they were less likely to meet the Triplets coming back to Secret Water, whether via the ladder at Little Bogie or from further upstream.

Phil criticized the canyon's hidden entrance. "Yous orta clear a proper path through this jungle."

Jim was patient. "No way — we don't want the Triplets — or anyone else — to find it."

The canyon proved yet another wonderland for the boys from Boxwatch. Mick bubbled with enthusiasm. "I never dreamt I'd ever come to a place like this." He stopped chattering long enough to look up towards the tops of the towering cliffs. They seemed close to meeting overhead... more wonder and awe. Willy-nilly, they all stopped to gaze up and about.

The Lawsons had only come up the Canyon once. Nor, as yet, had they ever come the whole way from top to bottom. For them, too, it proved resplendent — 'all things bright and beautiful'. And there is a whole new pleasure in showing off your wonders to a group of keen first-timers, especially the glories of the bush.

The ladder up a small cliff sloped at the awkward angle of 45°. Jack advised, "Best you bend over like this and use your hands," and he led the way himself.

Mick came next, and showed off. He tried to walk erect. He swayed sideways, using his staff as a balan-

cing pole, but half way up began to totter backwards.

Instinctively, Jim crouched to cushion Mick's fall, which he hoped would not splatter him as well.

But Mick got his balance back. Jack gave him a proper 'blast' for not obeying. "Why d'yer wanta spoil a happy day with yer shank bones pokin' out all which ways? Can we carry yer home with a busted backbone?"

Joe chortled his own chorus. "Yo ho yep yes! And Micky, yers weren't wearing yer crash helmet..."

Later, Jim told Jack, "You blahed on as good as Mum" — which Jack reckoned quite a compliment.

At Cubby's Cave there was more *Oooh* and *Aaah*.

Jack went straight to the Log Book. "Aha," he said. "Greg and Bernie *did* put their names here on Thursday arvo. I hoped they would. But they didn't know we have a secret way of putting it in the tin so that we can tell if strangers have pulled it out and read it and not made an entry."

Rick was puzzled. "What's it matter?"

Jim explained proudly, "It's *my* counter-spy idea in case of aliens like the Shy Spy Triplets. We'll know that they don't know that we know they've been here."

Jack chivvied them along in his haste to get home. But first, they had themselves to write in the Log.

He opened the entry in the usual way with the day, date and time, and then his name. The visitors went next and put their names, and lastly Jim and Joe. None of them was aware of the custom of adding a brief comment in visitors' books.

But it prompted Mick to say longingly, "I do wish I lived at Guntawang and could come here often."

Rick and Phil spoke feelingly. "Me too!"

Phil shook his head sadly. "The only thing wrong with coming here is having to go back to Boxwatch."



"CARRY YER HOME WITH A BUSTED BACK?"

He groaned. "And my Dad says we're moving to Lahdidar cos Mum says it's a better class area. Who cares? It'll be even more *ugh* and *yuk* than Boxwatch."

Joe was sympathetic. "Well, our cousins Simon and Dominic live in Lahdidar." He added brightly, "You can get around with them."

Phil sighed again. "That'd only be all right if we could go bush with 'em here — and with you."

Jim concluded soothingly. He glanced at Jack. "We'll ask you up again in the Christmas holidays."

* * * *

The canyon came to an abrupt end with the final barrier, the little cliff with rusty iron spikes. Up top, the scrub was even denser than at Koala Creek.

Jack told the visitors, "We don't want a path here either. Someone might find it from on top."

Mick, Rick and Phil admired the secrecy provisions. Oh! how they wished they lived closer!

* * * *

Radiant faces burst into the kitchen.

Jim made for the white-board and wrote, 'Back at 1500', and Jack thought how an early rise and an early start made it possible to pack so much into a day.

After a burst of greetings, Mum and Dad prompted, "Had a good time?" and "Glad you went?"

The Lawsons let the visitors go first.

Mick beamed. "Best day of my life — ever!" and Dad wondered if such joy is a sort of angelic virtue.

Rick grinned. "You betcha! Cool!" He reflected a moment. "And last night, too, when we dunked each other in the trough."

That was news to the grown-ups. So *that* was what they were up to... Nanna chuckled. Dad gave a little smile. Mum sighed inwardly and told herself, "Boys

will be boys". At least, they had not left muddy footprints on the towels.

"Today, I was the only one not to get wounded," claimed Phil.

Rick grinned. "And me too." He forgot dangling in space over a cliff and the splinter at the slip-rails.

In their first sweeping glance, Dad and Mum had noted the lump on Mick's head, a nasty gravel-rash on Rick's knee, and general abrasions on knees and elbows.

Dad changed the subject and saved the boys from criticism. "Well, Jack, Jim and Joe. You're home early, how about going to Confession this arvo?"

He glanced at the twins, knowing he could depend on them not to make smart remarks like 'Oho! What've *you* been up to?' as some big sisters do.

Was it accident or pre-planned that Jack had got them home early? Jim did notice Jack flick his eyes sideways at Mick, Rick and Phil.

Dad glanced at the clock. To Meg, he said, "Perhaps they all might go, if we go at once? They can wash the bits that show, you know, faces and hands and knees. We'd be back by half past five, in time to get water hot for the main bathroom and *they* can shower after tea."

Mrs Lawson smiled and nodded agreement. She would have had them shower first, but she understood, and said simply, "Yes, it's a fortnight since Jack, Jim and Joe went. Nanna and the twins and I'll keep the roast hot till you're back."

And the twins proved their form again. Kathleen smiled and said, "We might even do your jobs — fires, cows and chooks — if we can fit it in."

Her brothers bowed gratefully. "Thank you!" Talk of first class big sisters! How the visitors goggled.

Later on, Nanna's private comment to her daughter was, "I really think Max had that set up with Jack for the visitors — and I must say this latest three are a deal easier to live with than Wal and Irene's brood."

While the boys were scrubbing off the more obvious grime 'from the parts that showed', Mick asked anxiously, "Do *we* have to go to Confession as well?"

Jack restrained himself from saying, "Of course, *that's* the whole idea." Instead, he grinned.

Jim gave his father's explanation. "It's like washing your face on its inside. You know, some thoughts and words and deeds need a clean up...."

* * * *

The twins made sure that friends Jill and Jane were also drafted. "Sorry we can't come with you," Colleen said, "But we get plenty of chances for Confession, and someone's got to help here."

Jill looked concerned. "I haven't been since my First Communion... I don't remember what to do."

"Nanna's decided to go, too," Kathleen reassured her. "She'll remind you in the car — and besides, Father John's really kind and sympathetic."

* * * *

When they got back, tea was ready. City folk usually call it dinner. Dad kept insisting, at least when he remembered, that the main meal was a convivium.

Although the reports usually worked up in ages — in case the littlies fell asleep — the boys prompted the older girls to speak first.

Colleen began with a teaser. "You'd never guess *what* we saw at Little Bogie?"

Jim gave a cheeky grin, "Three tiger snakes."

Colleen was as yet quite ignorant of Jim's eavesdropping. She spoke with gloomy glee, calculated to

provoke her brothers. "No, they were three boys..."

"Uggle-gluggle!" groaned Jack. "Sorry, Colleen, I forgot you didn't know that the Shy Spy Triplets were going there. Anyway, we couldn't've warned you."

Jim interrupted again, and chirpily "There! I told you it was three tiger snakes..."

It was Mum's turn to break in on a speaker. "Now Jim, you mustn't call those boys names, especially nasty names like 'tiger snake'. Those boys sound to Dad and me the right sort to have as friends."

Jim nodded contritely. "Sorry Mum." Then to the twins, "Did they run away? Or did they stop to talk?"

Kathleen came in gleefully. "Sort of yes and sort of no to both questions." She glanced at Colleen. "Would you like to go on, or will I?"

Colleen bowed graciously to her less talkative sister.

Though more accustomed to listening than talking, Kathleen enjoyed herself. "When we had Patricia here last Sunday with the sun cooking us like tonight's roast, we never got to Little Bogie. Today, we were nattering away as girls do" — Jim chuckled, so she added, "and boys," before going on — "and this was our first time there. We gazed down in wonder at a beautiful pool and we saw three boys in bright yellow swimming trunks."

Kathleen continued. "They didn't see us till they heard us on the ladder. But by the time we got to the bottom, they were stuffing three neat stacks of clothes into a knapsack. So Coll called out, 'It's all right! We're only four friendly girls — you don't have to go.' And their leader..."

Jack butted in. "Greg calls him Shadrach."

Kathleen smiled. "He raised his funny straw hat to us — they all did — and he called back, 'Thanks, Miss, but it's time we went', and off they tramped."

Colleen chuckled. "Pardon me, twin, but it really was funny seeing them going off, wearing nothing but cossies and straw hats, and carrying their boots. What's more, those cossies were not just bright yellow but had bright stripes down the sides. But first, their leader dumped a billy of water on a smouldering fire at the back of the cave. As you boys might put it, he 'saddled up his knapsack' and they set a fast pace upstream."

"Downstream, you mean," corrected Joe. "It's downstream on your left."

Kathleen corrected him firmly. "Well, that proves it was *upstream* because they hurried off to our *right*."

That puzzled Jack and he protested, "But... but they've left a tent and a whole lot of camping gear at The Secret Water, and that's downstream."

Here Jim reminded him. "I overheard these boys say they wouldn't start camping till tomorrow."

Dad broke his own rule and interrupted. "I can guess why. They've got their camp ready and gone home. Remember? Those school colours green, gold, red, blue mean the Academy of Bible Christians, and they'd never miss their Bible Christian Church on Sunday. They'll be back tomorrow, after church."

Jack and Jim nodded. Everyone could see this explained it.

Colleen invited reports from the visitors.

Mick's big sister Jill went first. "Little Bogie was wonderful. Now I can see why boys love the bush. Well, there was a log crossing over the lower pool..."

Joe squirmed at the mention of this 'log'. And embarrassing memories swept over Jack, Jim and Joe. The others noticed them flinch, but no one asked about it, not even afterwards. They were *very* relieved.

Jill went on. "We were able to dive from the

middle of this log into deep water. It was fun!"

Jane was equally delighted. "I'm so glad that Coll and Kath can go swimming again — in clean water with no chlorine and no germs." The twins smiled.

Just then Dad's mobile phone rang in the hall. He excused himself and ambled off casually to answer it. He did not believe that phone calls got priority over the people present. Then his voice echoed in the corridors: "For you, Jack, it's Harry Mahoney."

* * * *

When Jack returned, he beamed: "Harry says Greg asked him to ring. Just like you said, Dad. Two of the Shy Spies are Dollermans and the third is a cousin who boards with them in school terms. They get round Galway Crags on high-priced electric bikes painted in their school colours blue, red, green and gold. They're very polite to everyone but don't mix much outside their Church and the Academy of Bible Christians. But Harry's got no idea why those boys are so keen on our part of the bush, except that they're real bushwalkers."

While they ate roast dinner and after that preserved peaches with custard, and tea, the six boys gave an account of their doings. It was brief, for they were beginning to droop with weariness.

After that came the Rosary prayer at the family altar in the Creation School Room. Then, from Joe's age and older they came back to do the washing up.

Jack announced, "We boys'll do the lot cos yous were so good doing our jobs earlier."

Colleen smiled sweetly. "Thanks, boys. But we'll help as well and do our choir practice. Our singing'll do you good — and we can keep an eye on you."

"Girls," thought Jack, "can put a spin on anything!"

Dad popped back. "If you like, write up your log

books tomorrow. Hurry up your showers and get to bed — no story tonight. For the visitors, Dad added, “Sunday’s our big day to begin a new week.”

* * * *

Six towel-clad boys arrived at the old laundry.

Jim checked the water in the copper with his finger. “Good on the twins! With the lid on, it’s still warm.”

* * * *

Back in their bedroom and in pyjamas, Jim suggested, “It’s not very late. Let’s get our Log Books done — better than puttin’ it off till tomorrow.”

Jack told the visitors, “You’s ’ava read of the *ABC of Camping* — it’s got stuff in it you mightn’t discover for yourself — without getting killed in the attempt!”

He wrote in his Log Book:

- The leader’s got to make sure some things don’t happen;
 - we called the ridge beyond Koala Creek The Southern Bulwark;
 - we found a way down from it to The Thunderfall.
- and he added the Southern Bulwark to the map.

Jim wrote in his Journal:

- SST were pitching a tent at the Secret Water;
 - I climbed a tree and heard them admit to eavesdropping;
 - they don’t know we know that they know what we know.
- When Jim read that last bit aloud, they felt dizzy.

Joe’s Jottings — after he’d ‘got his second wind’ — were stick figures with brief captions:

- Mick swung round a tree and nearly fell over a cliff.
- Mick let go one of the ropes and crashed down the slope.

It made him grin just to remember it.

And so ended a glorious day, with the promise of a further thrilling episode tomorrow.

Chapter 18

In Paradise

DAD woke the boys at half past five — for Sunday made no difference to early rising.

Mick, Rick and Phil did not complain. Once more they paired off with Jack, Jim and Joe to their duties with the fires, the milking and the chooks.

Family prayers before breakfast were slightly longer on Sundays. Like so much else in the lives of the Lawsons, the visitors found any sort of family prayers a new experience. However, the three-course breakfast two days running was a new experience for the locals.

Phil grinned. “You *do* make beaut porridge.”

Dad returned the compliment. “And you make just the right fire for cooking it. Thank you. And Jim and his cow for giving us the creamy milk.”

Rick praised the bacon and eggs with toast. This prompted Joe. “Don’t forget, Dad, I said I’d mind the pigs if you’d only get ’em and you said I’d be called ‘Swineherd Joe’...” To Joe, the title was a pledge for the future, a talisman guaranteeing an outcome.

Tommy too put in a bid for fame. “I got the eggs.”

Mum smiled. “Thank you, Tommy and Joe, for the eggs. Mick: do thank your mother for the bacon.”

Mum’s home-made bread was toasted, then butter melted in like the honey in a honeycomb. They had it with jam. Mugs of tea rounded off a *very* filling breakfast.

The twins heated flat irons on the stove top for the five dresses. The visitors now showed no surprise at such antiques from the 19th century, a further inculturation into the old ways of many yesterdays.

Dad conducted his usual Sunday inspection of the

boys — faces, hair, hands, nails, knotted ties and shiny boots. Mum had already checked their Sunday-best long trousers and white shirts. She and Nanna were putting the finishing touches on the littlies and the baby, while Tilly kept them from messing it up, for enforced inaction is galling to the young.

The family van was over-loaded. Dad prayed the police were not about. His old drill for hiding smaller bodies among the feet of bigger ones was uncouth for Sunday clothes, so the twins and Jill dinked the littlies — whose squirmings did not improve the ironing.

Older parishioners arriving early at the Church of Saint Gregory the Great were pleasantly rewarded. Not for many years had they seen anything like it — three adults and nine Lawson children, plus three extra boys and two extra girls. They smiled, not disapproving, but shook their heads lest they be dreaming.

After their prayers on arrival, Jack, Jim and Joe went off to vest in albs. They were junior servers apprenticed to the much-experienced Mahoney brothers.

The twins took Jill and Jane to join the Mahoney sisters and others in the choir. With depletion by seven there were still ten left in the Lawson's front seat.

Poor Mick, Rick and Phil were envious, and were given a new role, to be big brothers to Tommy and Billy. Dad's said their families were 'lazy Catholics'. Mum declared this harsh and suggested "*lapsed*."

"Okay," countered Dad. "Lax." Anyhow, for the visitors, it was the first time a Mass really lifted them 'out of themselves'. They forgot to be 'bored'.

In their choir role, Jill and Jane were deeply moved. Here was beauty and dignity worthy of the Creator, the humbling joy that human nature needs. It was not a matter of mere words, rather a higher beauty far

eclipsing even the glories of sky and bush. So it was a strengthening for good resolutions.

* * * *

After Mass, the boys thanked Father John for the secret benefactor fixing up the Land Rover, and Harry Mahoney for his news on the Shy Spy Triplets.

Driving home, Dad told the boys, "I'd like you home from your bush expedition by 1500."

Jack wheedled at him to explain further. Dad stonewalled: "Jack, it'll only happen if you're home early. If you're late, it won't happen, not for you."

Jack glanced at his faithful lieutenant. Then to Dad, "In that case, we'll put off exploring beyond the Southern Bulwark and explore closer home — and we'll skip morning tea." And to the others, "As soon as we're home, we'll get into old clothes and get going. I'll fix the food." And to the visitors, "We've got a secret surprise for you — a brief glimpse of paradise." In his turn, he too refused to be wheedled.

* * * *

Joe was in the lead, munching Anzac biscuits, as they climbed through the sliprails. He branched off the main track and led them down their old firewood trail. It was where the Lawsons had come up on Friday.

They plunged through the trackless scrub into the deepening split in the ridge. So far, so good.

Spread before them lay the tree packed basin-crater, rimmed by *The Walls of Paradise*. Alack and alas! not only did the Guardian cliffs keep out aliens, but the Lawsons themselves could not find their way in, the hidden track-head, the way they had come out.

While they hunted about, Jim pointed to the crown of a taller tree. By any standard, all the trees below were tall. "Vying for sunlight," asserted Jim, "gasping

for a breath of Dad's carbon dioxide blah to feed on."

Jack rubbished any blah. "Never mind the carbon dioxide: all we want is our chimney." He explained to the visitors: "A chimney's a deep crack in the cliff. The one we need begins with a steep tunnel and we climb down in it onto a steep ramp of loose stones."

Mick, Rick and Phil glanced at each other and shook their heads. Mick asserted, "There couldn't possibly be a tunnel here." But he hoped he was wrong.

All six searched diligently. Their simple system was to follow round the cliff rim. This yielded several false alarms: several small chimneys, vertical on all sides, lacking ramps or tunnels.

Jack sulked. "I orta be kicked for not marking it."

Rick chortled, "Okay, I'll oblige!" and he did.

"Go slow, you hoodlums!" growled Jim. Then, to Jack. "It was *your* idea not to mark it, lest aliens find it. You said *our* markers would be natural features, like weird bits of rock or funny-shaped trees."

Finally, Mick found it. And even then, he nearly missed it, hidden in a tangled jumble of big rocks and a scrubby jungle of small trees.

He vanished. Rick called, "Mick! Where are you?"

A muffled voice echoed out of the earth beneath their feet. "Come on down. It's not a tunnel, it's a free fall into The Underworld, it's a Devil's Burrow!"

Jim grinned. "Good name. I'll add it to the map."

"*The Devil's Burrow* sounds just right," agreed Jack, "but I'll take the lead — this is dangerous." Then he remembered. "And we've gotta go quietly in case the Shy Spy Triplets've found the lower entrance."

"It's creepy," muttered Rick, "and 'devil' sounds spooky in here. Are you sure we're... *all right?*"

Phil pointed ahead, "That's daylight down there."

“Don’t look at bright light,” warned Jack. “Keep yer night vision to watch yer feet or yer’ll slide — and bust every bone in yer body to tiny smithereens.”

From here on, finding the route was easy but going down it was not. The tunnel ended and became an equally steep descent. Jack tossed more advice over his shoulder. “Going downhill’s real risky.”

It was so steep that Rick could see over Jack’s head. The chimney seemingly plunged into nothingness — followed by treetops. He cried out in fear, “It’s getting worse! It’s the End! It’s the Edge of the world!”

He caught his boot on rock, stumbled and slid, and crashed into Jack. They pitched forward together. It would have been better if both had gone sprawling.

By what miracle he did not know, Jack grappled to anchor them, with fingers and nails on the rough rock sides, to get a grip, to take off momentum. He was doing it for both of them, for Rick was paralyzed with panic.

They pulled up right on the big brink...

“*Laudate, Dominum!*” gasped Jack.

Ever obliging, Jim translated, “He means, ‘Praise, the Lord.’”

Mick, next in line, aimed to cheer them with light-hearted humour. “No more sky diving!”

Jack agreed, but more stolidly. “No diving into greenery,” he advised. “Only a Greenie does it and he ends up splattered Red all over” — he was quoting Dad.

Jack got Rick round the left turn onto the ledge and safety. He waited to catch any other ‘slippages’. The others crept cautiously onto the ledge.

This ledge sloped down a long way. What with a high cliff on the left and treetops floating in emptiness far below on the right, it was spectacular scenery, and broad enough not to be quite so dangerous.

Then the ledge switched back and kept going down. Jack gave an old-style right turn signal. It was really a U-turn. The next traverse was a trough, with a cliff growing higher and higher on the right, and with a low wall on the left. It was a mutant rock chimney.

Phil enthused, "Cool! the way it keeps going down."

"Last lap ahead," announced Jack. He turned left into a more normal chimney with walls of equal height.

At the final three metre cliff, Jack climbed down first on the tree roots, then Jim and Mick — so there were 'heavies' to catch Rick in case he slipped again.

Finally, they clambered down the tree-clad screes after the cliffs. These trees hid the Secret Stairs, Jim's Jacob's Ladder — highly dangerous, in stark contrast to the Narrow Way at the lower end of Paradise, where the secret cleft would only sprain your ankle.

"Better spread out a bit," proposed Jim. "We mustn't make a tell-tale track to betray our secret."

Mick gazed a'low and aloft. He spoke softly, almost reverently: "The Eighth Wonder of the World."

"With more to come," Jim assured him.

Jack managed to enthuse, more than usual for him. "You'll see." It was a soothing saying he had picked up from Greg Cumberland. Then he remembered, "Ssssh! or the Shy Spy Triplets might hear us."

So successful was their silence that the bird life at the pool was late detecting their approach.

Then with fierce cries of fear and anger, the birds took off. For their part, those kangaroos, which were still feeding in the late morning, loped off on their soft and silent pads, to concealment and safety.

At Paradise Pool, Joe was even hungrier than usual. He had an idea — his family were liable to have ideas: "Let's make morning tea into lunch, yo ho yep yes!"



JACK GRAPPLED TO ANCHOR THEM

Everyone agreed. They chanted, "Yo ho yep yes!"

Jim rebuilt their fireplace and soon they had two billies on a fire, plus the bigger dixie with six sausages and the smaller with onion and tomato.

During the cooking, they swam. From time to time Jack or Jim came out to juggle the cooking of the other six sausages.

Half-dried and half dressed, they blest themselves and the food, and happily ate *without* cutlery.

Mick burst out, "No wonder you call it Paradise!"

"*Paradisum*, please," begged Jim, "it sounds better."

During the leisurely lunch, the visitors gazed on the big timber and its lawn. Phil was still in bare feet when bull ants stung him on both feet at once. Jack lectured him on obedience even while he applied the ammonia.

They moved off, and the Lawsons gloated over the Big Tree a few hundred metres below the pool. Jim decreed it would henceforth be called Grandfather Gum Tree. For the Boxwatch visitors who didn't read much, he explained, "It's in *Children of the Dark People*."

Further on, Jack pointed at the rivulet: "It disappears with a gurgle into all those rocks. Why?"

This aroused their curiosity. They spun various theories. Jim said, "It must come out at the waterfall."

Silently they trod the slippery stones beneath the towering cliffs of the Narrow Way.

Jack spoke urgently to Joe. "You're smallest. Go on ahead and make sure no one's there to see us."

Joe reported "All clear" and Jack warned the others not to break any greenery or leave any track or footprint.

With Rick in the lead, they made their way upstream to The Secret Water. Here Jack said, "Sssh! Smell the smoke?" and sent Jim to reconnoitre.

Jim was grateful the thick scrub and the gurgling

creek concealed his approach. And surely the Shy Spy Triplets would be chattering?

He was quickly back, face flushed with excitement. "They're there!" he hissed, "and in swimming. Their clothes and hats are in tidy piles. There's something yellow poking out of a pocket in their knapsack, probly the cossies the girls saw them in." There's gear stacked all round the tent and they've got things cooking on a fire. I heard Shadrach say, 'We'll start looking after lunch and another early start tomorrow.' And just like our own little brother"— he glanced at Joe — "that Meshach said, 'As long as there's lots of swimming'."

As usual, Joe rejoined chirpily. "Meshach's *your* age, Jim, so yah boo to you and yo ho yep yes!"

Jack sighed and glanced at Jim. "I'd love to hear more, but it's not honourable to eavesdrop on purpose."

With a cunning grin, Jim declared, "Well, there's a way round that. March in on them, accidental like, and tell 'em we need a swim, too, whether they like it or not. Then we'd make 'em tell their secrets."

Joe was direct and emphatic. "Yo ho no nope no! Remember how I told Greg and Bernie what they should've done? It was my best plan right from the start: pinch their clothes till they promise to tell us all they know."

So far Mick, Rick and Phil had listened in silence. Now they laughed uproariously. Jack and Jim glared at them and whispered fiercely. "Sssh! they'll hear you!"

Jack told Jim, "It was different when Greg and Bernie burst in on 'em last Thursday and thought it was us. But *they* would never barge in unwanted, and we wouldn't like the Shy Spy Triplets doing it to us."

Even this did not quell Jim. "Okay, a better idea. "Hide here and wait and see where they go."

Jack groaned. "No good. We haven't got time. We've got to get home early." Jim nodded reluctantly.

Joe looked quite pained. "What about another swim?" The visitors murmured agreement.

Jack and Jim shook their heads. Jack thought more slowly than Jim, so it was Jim who had the idea. "Well, if we're home early enough, we can have a water fight."

Everyone brightened up at the prospect.

* * * *

Jack gave the orders. "Okay, up the Pup Ridge, quick march. Phil in front, then me next to guide him, and Jim, rear-guard." Jack reflected for a moment on how patient, faithful and dependable was Jim.

The Pup Ridge began on the left of the hidden entrance to Cubby's Canyon. It was another quick way home, and saved a walk upstream to Little Bogie and the ascent by the ladder. It would be new scenery for the visitors.

It was not really a ridge, rather a ramp on the side of the flanking cliffs. And it had a faint track.

They paused briefly to look back. The Secret Water was completely hidden by its surround of trees. Only a gentle gurgle from the creek broke the silence.

This track joined that from Little Bogie to home. They climbed over the splintery post-and-rail fence, into the home paddock, and in at the kitchen door.

And there and then the Surprises began.

Chapter 19

Good Old Fred

INDEED, SUCH WERE the surprises that Jim quite forgot to write up their time of return.

The kitchen was full of people.

Mum, Dad and Nanna; Colleen, Kathleen and Tilly (Tommy and Billy were in the sandpit); Jill and Jane; and Mrs Cumberland (of course! Mum had invited her for Sunday) and it was clear which man was her husband. He stood, and was duly introduced.

The Biggest Surprise, however, was a very old man.

Dad smiled his pleasure: "Fred: These are Jack, Jim and Joe, three of our sons, and their friends Mick, Rick and Phil." And to the youngsters, "Boys, this is Mr Fred Fox, who so kindly sold *Terra Sancta* to us — along with the wonderful vegie garden, orchard and chooks, plus the Land Rover and all the hardware."

Old Fred radiated that goodwill which is so fitting in old man greeting up-and-coming youngsters.

They shook hands heartily, with "Pleased to meet you," and "Thank you for the Land Rover," and "We'd like to show you round."

They settled down to a huge afternoon tea, and Dad told Old Fred, "These boys have hollow legs."

Jack, Jim and Joe welcomed the yarn with Old and Famous Fred. For their part, Dad and Mr Cumberland watched their gestures and listened eagerly, as the adventurers related their travels with much verve.

Meanwhile, Mrs Lawson breast-fed Bridget and, with Nanna and Mrs Cumberland, occupied Jill and Jane and the twins in more feminine affairs.

At first Jack, Jim and Joe swept Old Fred off his

feet, prattling on about the Land Rover, wood-getting and explorations in a maze of detail. He proved an avid listener, and was so pleased to hear how they had found Cubby's Cave. Yes, he had been there once, long, long ago. No, he had not told their Dad. "Do you good to find out things for yourselves," he chuckled, "as I'm sure your Dad does to you."

Oh ho, didn't they know it!

No, he'd never done the ridge walk to *The Hills of Home* and he shook his head in shame at never finding Paradise. Nevertheless, he was delighted to hear of their exploits, and particularly how they stumbled into Paradise from the lower end near The Thunderfall.

They gave him a briefing on the Shy Spy Triplets.

The name Dollerman got Old Fred going... "Ernie Dollerman." He paused to roll the name round his mouth and chuckled again. It was such an encouraging chuckle, full of enthusiasm. "He's the biggest wheeler and dealer in the Wild Bush Mountains. Got pots of money, and got it honestly, mind you. And he gives a lot of money to worthwhile causes and hushes it up. He's a real family man — it's just too bad that he and Sue could not have children. He adopted Dudley and Dennis when they were aged four and two. Their parents were killed in a car smash. You see, their father was his brother. He was already their uncle and gladly became their new father. The third boy is David Marsden, a cousin on their first mother's side. He goes home up the country for his holidays."

Now came his suggestions on their puzzlements. "Mr Dollerman might be after photos of one of those rare birds that likes high trees — want them for tourists to buy as postcards — he's an entrepreneur. And young Dud is a naturalist and mad on birds and beasts

and all that. Their school's pretty religious and encourages that sort of stuff, and it's keen on lots of outdoor fun to get 'em off television and computer games and internet addiction. The joke is, neither the school nor young Dud is interested in making money, though both have access to pots of it — but then, Dollerman does all their money worrying for them."

Jim told him, "We're starting camping this week in Cubby's Cave," and that reminded Jack of something.

He asked, "Did you ever have any tents, Mr Fox?"

"No, I regret to say," chuckled Old Fred. "Did you think I'd've hidden one and expect you to find it?"

The three boys grinned at this thrust. Jim lamely admitted, "Well, we just thought you might've."

Old Fred grinned. "I'll tell you how to make one."

Jack hurried to fetch his Log Book. "No more discovery method," he muttered. "And we're not going to re-invent the wheel either."

The old man sketched rapidly and explained as he went. Later that evening, Jack completed the entry from vivid memories of what Old Fred had said.

At this point, Dad interrupted. "Excuse me, Fred." Then to his sons. "You may not have noticed, but I've sent the visitors off to pack. In five minutes, I must drive them to the station for their train. Best you come now and say good-bye."

There was a great exchange of farewells, handshakes and kissing, suited to age and sex. Old Fred smiled to himself. He understood. He'd been a boy.

For the visiting girls, their pleasure had been more in people than in roaming the bush. For them, telling Boxwatch friends about the bush picnic and swim yesterday would be even more satisfying than doing it. Today, after church, the four girls had gone riding on

the three ponies, had a light lunch, and played doubles at tennis in the early afternoon.

They were more vocal than the boys in thanking Mr and Mrs Lawson. They remembered to thank Tilly for lending them Lucy and also the twins for lending them Liz, which had given them a pony each, with Lady left to carry both twins together.

Mick, Rick and Phil were not good at putting their feelings into words. Their limit was, "Thank you for having us." Yet they had been deeply moved at the happy Lawson family, happy in spite of, or because of, their isolation and self-sufficiency; and the rhythm of family work, family fun, and fun for boys; and the all-pervasive but not oppressive courtesy and piety.

As they were getting into the van, Rick voiced their only dissatisfaction. "We don't wanna go home!"

Nanna was soothing. "Aren't you a tad homesick?"

Mick supported Rick. "Homesick? No! We're sick of home. Nothing exciting happens there, not like here. Who'd live in Boxwatch or Lahdidar after this?"

Phil also chimed in, in tones tinged with regret. "My Mum and Dad have got us moving to Lahdidar, but I'll try getting 'em to move up here instead."

Mrs Lawson said nothing. She knew Phil's Mum and her social climbing — and felt sorry for them all.

Sympathy, not cold reasoning, was her response.

Dad did his best. "There's always a next time, boys, and in the meantime, happy memories."

Later, Mum told Nanna, "Blest are we at *Terra Sancta*."

* * * *

The boys invited Old Fred on their evening jobs. Joe grabbed the old man's free hand, leaving the other for his walking stick. Jack and Jim were outriders to left and right. Old Fred seemed to like it. They set

off on a short jaunt to study the improvements in the Land Rover and their use of his old tool room. They remembered to thank him for the pocket knife.

Though yapping without pause to Old Fred, they still got through their usual family jobs.

* * * *

When Dad came back from the railway station, he gave a similar tour to the Cumberlands.

While the boys were showering, the Lawson ladies got their chance to talk with Old Fred. They were particularly interested in the years he lived on his own at *Terra Sancta*, and of the scraps he had acquired of its ancient history as a boarding school, The Guntawang Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen.

Meanwhile, Jack, Jim and Joe were discussing their own visitors. Joe reckoned, "They were a lot rougher and a bit tougher than our cousins, but not really good enough for our sort of exploring."

Jim added, "A bit prone to accidents."

Jack smiled and reflected aloud, "Well, though we didn't get to Mount Zodiac, they were good fun, and Dad and Mum were pleased to get 'em to Confession."

"Who're we asking for next weekend?" asked Joe.

Jim groaned. "Mum and Dad want us to ask Ben, Ken and Steve, but they're such softies, they'd be no use."

Jack was thoughtful. "Dad told me Ben's Dad would like us to toughen them up."

Jim reconsidered. "They sure need it! Ben's clumsy, Ken's a scared-dee-cat, and Steve's a yapper, but they're easy to get on with and not rude and crude."

Rude — it also meant manners. Jack had to write that letter to the unknown benefactor. He got dressed, and in the kitchen showed off his flowing handwriting with a calligraphy pen to Old Fred. He wrote:-

LETTER to our unknown BENEFACTOR

per favorem Father John Tyndale

Dear Providential Benefactor of the Lawson family,

I am writing c/- Father John Tyndale PP Galway Craggs, to thank you ever so much from us all for your kindness in paying for the repairs on our Land Rover.

It is now safe to drive for our wood-getting at *Terra Sancta*. No doubt Father John told you, we depend on firewood for our 'solid solar energy', for cooking, laundry, baths and showers, since we lack electric power lines.

You may be sure of our daily prayer of gratitude for you: "Reward with eternal life, O Lord, all who have done good to us for Thy Name's sake."

On behalf of Jim and Joe and all the family, I am,

Yours gratefully in God,

Jack Lawson

* * * *

Mr and Mrs Cumberland were back from seeing the glories of *Terra Sancta*. No, they would not stay for the evening meal. Jack guessed they would have, if they had not been looking after Old Fred.

For his part, Old Fred explained he must go. "Matt and Mary are putting me up for the night. I'm just no good after dark, and Matt'll drive me to Penrose in the morning and put me on a local train — it has to be one that stops at my station."

The boys helped Old Fred into the Cumberlands' van. They said, "Thank you, and do come back soon."

At the convivium, the boys were ravenously hungry. Yet they had so much to say. It was difficult to talk without a mouthful.

Jack smiled affably at Dad. "It was a secret before and we couldn't tell you. On Friday we found a valley Jim called Paradise. And it was only this morning that we finally decided to show it to the visitors."

Jim bridled. "Please, Jack: *Paradisum*, and it's down the Devil's Burrow and *my* Jacob's Ladder."

Mum balked at linking Heaven and Hell. But Dad skirted any objections. He said, "Your valley sounds like an extinct volcano, with some rich basalt soil. Not like the hungry sandstone up here. Our poetic name-sake Henry Lawson reckoned stringybarks are a sure sign of poor soil. Keep a look out for the quartzite junction, where the igneous rocks cooked the sedimentary rocks into metamorphic rocks."

Jim told him triumphantly. "Jack's already found it: it's the wall of the dam. It's terribly hard rock."

"But now," said Jack, "we've gotta finish the letters for next weekend. The draft texts're in the computer. Dad'll take them to school on his USB memory stick, and email them from its computer."

The final text was worded the same for each:-

EMAIL LETTERS TO BEN, KEN & STEVE

Dear Ben,

Dad & Mum said we may invite you, and Ken and Steve, to come to *Terra Sancta* next weekend. Along with your sister Bess, our sisters are inviting two girls from the parish choir. You'll need Bess: she's old enough to escort you on the train. Next Friday there's one gets here at 3.15p.m. and an earlier one (better) at 12.45p.m. Please let us know ASAP which one you'll come on. Either way, we'll meet you.

Dad and Mum will be sending details to your parents. If they are still in doubt, get them to talk to Mr Walter Burke, our uncle, because he brought our cousins Simon & Dominic here a week ago, and this weekend Mick, Rick and Phil were here. They'll tell you how good things are.

We're getting better at going bush, and got even better plans for you, maybe sleeping in a tent near the house.

Yours sincerely,
Jack Lawson

An ATTACHMENT to the emails said:-

THINGS TO BRING — CLOTHES AND GEAR

Bring nothing except these:-

FOR	ITEM	we must travel light, so NO EXTRAS
Head	Hat	big broad brim, perhaps with chinstrap
Top	Shirt	cotton, with collar, long sleeves rolled up
Bottom	Shorts	very roomy, reach to knee (khaki best)
Extras	Pockets	hanky, string, matches, Rosary, (knife?)
Legs	Socks	thick, with no holes
Feet	Boots	sturdy, gym or leather (waterproof?)
Night	Pyjamas	only indoors; in bush, sleep in clothes;
Warmth	Bedding	sleeping bag/blanket (needn't be in knapsack)
Weather	Coat	Parka OR raincoat/jumper (just in case)
Bush	Gear	small knapsack; enamel mug and bowl; soup-spoon; pocket knife optional.

WHAT JACK/JIM/JOE BRING FOR ALL GOING BUSH:

1. billies, cooking dixies, one pocket knife shared;
2. tent + groundsheet;
3. First Aid Kit against wounds, snakes, and bull ants;
4. water bottle in case of dehydration;
5. compass and maps (latter we made while exploring);
6. matches, rope, soap; toilet paper+digger; *Citronella*;
7. all food; and EVERYONE MUST DRINK TEA TO SURVIVE.

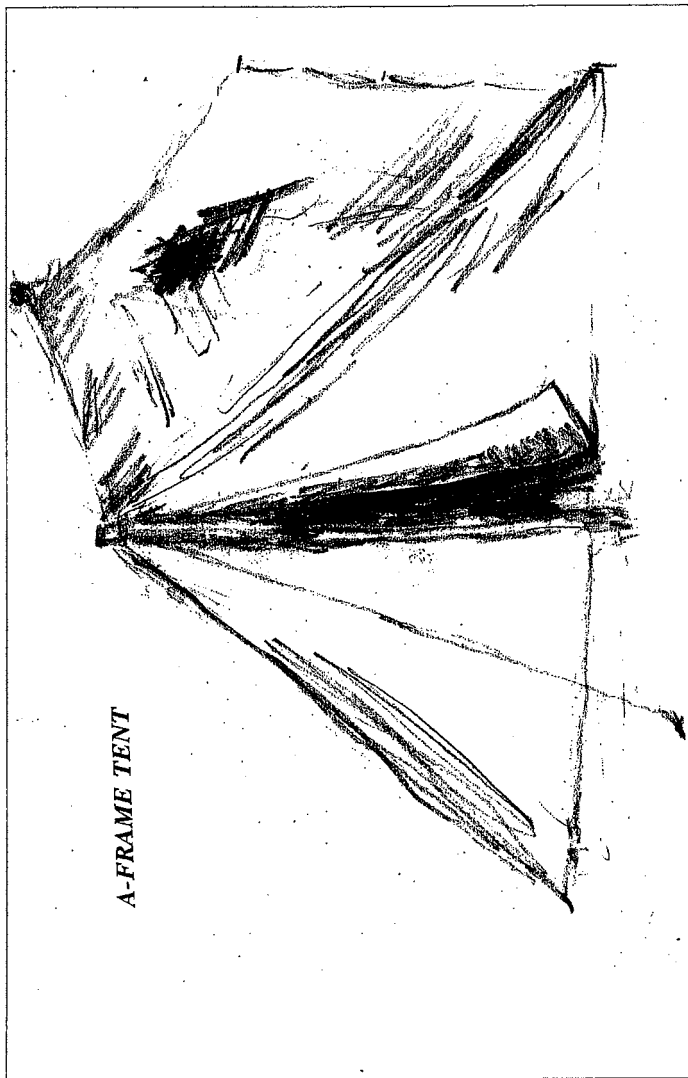
VISITORS DO **NOT** BRING THESE THINGS:-

1. no table knife or fork — outdoors we use soup-spoons;
2. no food (though a bit of bacon would be welcome);
3. no towels: we dry in sun, at fire, or on shirt tails & hankies;
4. no watch: we tell time by the sun;
5. no mobile phone: lacks range and spoils being in the bush;
6. no radio etc: we explorers yarn, sing, tell campfire stories.

Jim commented, "You've changed it a bit." He added dryly, "And you've toned it down."

Jack beamed. "Fine-tuned for nervous nellies."

Joe declared, "Aw, we can just chuck out what they shouldn't bring, yo ho yep yes — an' chuck whoever



A-FRAME TENT

brought it in the creek, just to learn 'em."

"We still have to tell 'em what they *do* need," Jack explained patiently, "and make sure our DOs and DON'Ts are really clear and don't get mixed up."

Finally, they wrote up their Log Books just on tents, and with pictures, from Old Fred's wisdom:-

Old Fred on Tents

(The boys were used to measuring in mixed units)

The A-frame is simple to make. It pitches very easily: either with 1 pole, 1 guy and a tree, or

2 guys, no tree, 5 poles (pairs crossed at ends, plus a ridge).

Our khaki cloth is okay for fabric, though a bit heavy.

Ours will have a separate floor, a cheap ground sheet.

Dimensions H = height, W = width, L = length: thus with

H = 6' (sides sloped 60° for rain), L = 6', W = 7',

there are six sleeping places 14" each (sleep head to toe).

Door triangles, $7' \times \frac{1}{2} = 3'$,

3'3" (these flaps must overlap);

tie-cords on doors: 4 or 5 inside & outside each door;

door flaps: both ends open, or swing up half as a verandah.

The eyelets and punch are in the tool room (need at least 12).

Ridge rope: can be loose, sewn in, or just a smooth stick.

Waterproofing: beeswax + paraffin wax + turps in tool room.

Slope area: slope $6.95' \times$ width $6' \times 2$ sides = 83.4

area of 4 overlapping-doors = $4 \times \frac{1}{2} (6' \times 3.6') = 43.2$.

Total area of fabric $83.35 + 43.2 = 126.6$ square feet.

Weight of fabric per sq ft = 20g.

Weight of fabric in tent = $2.53 \text{ kg} = 5.6 \text{ lbs}$

to which must be added weight of waterproofing & cordage.

THE BOLT OF KHAKI from SVdeP is 100 cm wide

- so the roof needs 2 strips and this allows overlap.
- Must make tent early in week in time for Friday night.

Chapter 20

Tutoring Tapers Off

JIM GRINNED broadly as he jumped out of bed. “Hurrah for the last week of school!” And he chanted the ancient doggerel: “No more lessons, no more books, no more teachers, ugly looks,” and added with feelings too deep for doggerel, “Exploring galore!”

Never had such a Monday dawned before!

Joe loved correcting his elders. After all, they were usually correcting him. “You don’t mean ‘last week’”. It’s only three and a half more days till we finish school on Thursday at lunchtime.” Hmmph!

Jack bided his time till after bedside prayers. “Never mind Thursday, it’s today that counts. Today! at long, long last, after a whole long week of waiting, I’ll get to drive the Land Rover again. Hurrah!”

They raced for the Old Laundry. Jim reminded Jack, “What about sleeping in Cubby’s Cave tonight — we put it off from last week, remember?”

Jack looked thoughtful. “I’m not so sure about it now. Actually, Old Fred was against it. He reckoned caves are good for cooking in rain, but tents are better for sleeping, even in rain. He knew blokes who pitched tents in a cave for extra warmth. But sleeping’s torture on tight packed sand or rough rocks or stones.”

Yes, Jim remembered that the Cumberlands had warned against sand. “It seems soft at first,” Greg had told them, “but it packs hard under you with your weight. Then, when you roll over in your sleep, it won’t re-shape. It sticks into you like a lot of lumpy rock and there’s nothing you can do about it. Greg reckoned it’s better sleeping on concrete than sand —

at least, it stays flat.”

With such practical problems to distract them, they splashed a token of soapy water on hands and faces.

Jim posed the alternative: “Okay, let’s make a tent this arvo, and sleep in it tonight. I reckon the far end of the home paddock, near the sliprails, would do.”

Jack, their thoroughgoing planner, thought of new problems. “We’d need a barrel of water to save coming to the house all the time, cos unless we boil a billy, it’s not really camping at all. But we can’t start today cos Dad’ll expect us to get more wood in the Land Rover.”

Jim turned his special cunning-look on Jack. “Okay, Nebuchadnezzar. You stoke the fiery furnaces hotter than ever. I’ll squeeze so much milk out of the cow that Dad’ll gasp. At breakfast he’ll barrack on our side, and that’ll persuade Mum and Nanna.”

* * * *

So with zest they raced into their jobs: lighting the cooking stove, firing up the coppers, milking Buttercup and feeding the chooks.

At breakfast, they were on their very best behaviour.

When everyone was there and the prayers had been said, Jack’s eyes met Jim’s, yet seemingly without any signal. Now was the time to ply the family with *applied psychology*, or ‘applied sike’ as Dad called it and boys misspelled it. For his part, Joe reckoned that anything with such a vile name and silly spelling was all blahney. Nevertheless, Joe was himself a specialist in the arts of wheedling and persuasion, both of which are important branches of ‘applied sike’.

Jack set the bowls of porridge in front of the hungry and opened the batting: “Dad, last Sunday you said we could sleep in Cubby’s Cave on a Friday night. You also said that you wouldn’t mind if we were a bit late

for our jobs on Saturday morning.” He paused.

Dad nodded obligingly. So far, so good.

Like a relay runner, Jim seized the baton. “But Dad, we couldn’t do that last Friday. Remember, we had Mick, Rick and Phil? So we thought, it’s never too late, and this Monday night could be a goer?”

With secret delight the psychologists watched Dad glance at Mum. Just as they hoped, Mum and Dad shook their heads. This too was part of The Plan.

It was Jack’s turn again. He fielded a New Idea. “Yesterday, Old Fred told Jim and me how to make a tent out of that khaki cloth. He said everything we need is in the workshop.” Like a conjurer, he produced his Log Book and waved the diagrams at them.

Then he paused for Jim. The audience had to keep swivelling eyes to whoever was speaking. “We’ve been thinking, Dad, of making that tent in the next couple of days. And do you know what? We could have Ben, Ken and Steve sleep in it on Friday night.”

One of Dad’s great virtues was that he tried very hard never to knock back a new idea, no matter how outlandish. He paused to think. The boys paused, too. They knew when silence was golden.

Of course, Dad and Mum and Nanna, and even the twins, recognized and relished this display of tactics. They did not object — it had entertainment value.

The younger ones just spooned in more porridge. The older ones held their breath — waiting for the answer. Finally, Dad responded with a question. “Where would you pitch it?” Aha! he was half-hooked.

The boys played him like landing a big fish. Jim’s first bid was minimal. “Oh, somewhere in the home paddock. Perhaps towards the slip rails?” He glanced at Mum. The more cautious parent usually needed

re-assuring. "And we'd take a barrel of water for washing and all that."

Even Joe could see through that one.

Dad beamed, but he watched Mum's face. The others were watching both of them. "But is it a good plan to start off with the visitors, with all six at once?"

Jack and Jim could not avoid giving each other little grins. They were landing their big fish nicely.

"Just what I was thinking, Dad," Jack replied.

"Exactly, Dad, me too," added Jim. "We three'd really need to practise by ourselves first."

That was blatant. Dad looked at Mum.

It was Jack's turn again. "You've said it, Dad! So how we practice it tomorrow night? Then we'd be able to plan managing an extra three boys. We'd leave you plenty of wood, and put kindling and small wood in the pot-bellied stove and the coppers for Wednesday morning. You'd only have to strike a match."

Now Mum intervened. She spoke with pretended primness. "You'd be missing your early morning class on Wednesday with Dad." Pause! "And the rest of the morning with Nanna and me." Again, a pause, to let this enormity sink in. Then, more encouragingly. "If we let you sleep in a tent on Tuesday night as a prelude to Friday night, you'd have to take note books to keep a Log Book of your doings. Joey can simply draw pictures and label them."

They all knew where she got that from. Mrs Cumberland had required it when Greg led the famous group of six on their great Monday-to-Saturday camping-on-the-move, when their own young Tommy, alone of the Lawsons, had seen the six boys¹ at the Guntawang

1 See *New Boys in the Bush* pp. 187-188, 233-234

Railway Crossing but was not believed.

Mum laid it on a bit more. "Also, you'll have to keep those Log Books going when you have the visitors." And with pretended fierceness, "Indeed, they'll have to do them as well."

Dad built on this, and thereby set it solid. "I think it would be best" — Jack and Jim knew this meant a command — "that you write up these logs after lunch, while you're resting in the shade to miss the sunburn and sunstroke, and *before* you start on anything else."

Mum smiled approvingly. This was another part of the Cumberland package deal.

Jim did not ease off. Having won camping-in-tent, he bid for more. "I say, Dad," he urged, "How about we pitch our camp just a bit outside the home paddock?" — which was what he and Jack had aimed at all along.

Yes, Dad could agree to that. "Great idea, Jim. Get right away, even from our semi-civilization here." As an afterthought, he added, "You'll *discover* a lot, too, and you can plan how to free the city slickers from slavery to electricity and gadgets."

Jack chuckled to himself. Things were going well. He ran the bidding even higher. "Well, Dad, there'd be even more things for us to *discover* in Paradise. How about we pitch a tent down there tomorrow arvo, sleep in it Tuesday night, come back in time for afternoon jobs, but leaving the tent there, ready for Friday night? They'd have to 'sleep primitive', like us explorers do."

Their father thought for a moment. His sons were using his own technique on him. And his infectious grin proved it. "Yes, Jack, and, of course, I know you won't do anything we wouldn't want."

Nanna concealed her chuckles as she thought: "It's a risk, but so's all responsibility. Yet it's the royal road

to maturity, the only road. But still, a risk." She must have a special word with Jack, on the quiet.

Aloud, however, she said, "Camping down in Paradise would save you taking your barrel of water."

The boys looked at her gratefully.

* * * *

After breakfast, Dad began their homeschool lesson.

Jim was cheerfully irreverent. He hissed to his siblings, "This is his third last circus this year, cos we'll only be here tomorrow and Thursday; and Friday's a holy day of obligation and we've got to go to Mass."

Colleen was only too willing to correct him. "It's a holy day of special devotion, but not of obligation."

Dad overheard. He was not miffed, but simply hissed back at Jim. "Yes, you start holidays on Friday." He put on a woebegone look. Then solemnly. "Alas, I don't start mine for two weeks from Thursday, and only four days before Christmas."

Then he waved a branch ripped off a eucalypt, and fired a salvo of questions: "What do trees feed on?"

Knowledge and ignorance gushed forth, with more of the same for, "How do they get water to drink?" and "What makes their leaves green and what are they for?"

He showed how bendy the branch was. Then he squeezed out sap. He moved to the windows. Dramatically, he closed the shutters, then re-opened them, chanting, "From sunshine to night and back again."

After this cryptic utterance, he brandished a dry stick. "Why does a green branch turn into a dead one?" More knowledge, ignorance, and guesses...

His coverage included photosynthesis, chlorophyll, growth and decay, sunlight, carbon dioxide and oxygen, pollution and waste. It was not as hands-on as usual, but it held their attention. A teacher is on stage...

After so much verbiage on the carbon cycle, Jim turned to Joe. He meant Dad to hear. "Bendy branches are lousy firewood. The good ones are dead and break with a snap." His leap of thought was mild relief.

Dad was rarely lost for a word, or for a smile to go with it. Cheerfully he told Jim, "Bendy branches are the best applied psychology for cheeky boys."

Dad's final leap of thought managed to end the lesson on occasions of sin in the society of bad companions. Phew! His class found it hard to keep tuned to his logic.

Jack and the twins chuckled openly: "Dad's done it again." Dad took no offence. He simply chuckled, too, and added, "I'll fetch your camping-out Log Books

He was soon back. "*Explorer's Log books*," he enthused. "They're pocket size, smaller than usual: A6s for Jack and Jim, and an A7 for Joe, respectively a quarter and an eighth of an ordinary A4 sheet. I'll let you *discover* for yourselves how to fit a tube on the side to hold a stubby pencil, one with a rubber on top."

When they lined up to farewell Dad for work, Jack gave him a shopping list, prepared (of course!) during the lesson. "Dad, could you please get us a square of thick plastic 7 feet each way? And some sausages for Tuesday night, please? Two each would be half a kilo."

"You're welcome." Dad smiled and strode off.

* * * *

The boys did their schoolwork for Mum and Nanna to perfection. The time flashed by till morning tea.

Drooling with sincerity and munching Nanna's scones, Jack asked, "Mum, could we start making our tent? and count it as the rest of this morning's school?"

Before Mum could reply, Jim spoke for the motion. "Tent's are easy to make, Mum, an' it count as Technology and Manual Arts, and applied mathematics

with practical measuring and calculating.”

“Yeah,” added Jack, “and very necessary for the visitors.” He blathered on. “It’s Physical Education and Personal Development” — he now drew out the next word to thump each syllable — “it’s Ed-u-ca-tion-al” — then a racing conclusion, “so it’s real schoolwork.”

Mum’s eyes twinkled with goodwill and shrewdness. “Who’s going to cut the khaki for your tent?”

Jack and Jim hesitated, looked at each other, and declared stoutly, “Us of course.”

Colleen scoffed. “What! You cut straight? Huh!”

Kathleen was kinder. “Would you let us help you?”

The boys were relieved and grateful. “Yes, please.”

Mum read the situation. “But can you boys sew? Have you ever sewed a button?”

Of course they hadn’t! “Pity,” murmured Nanna. “Every man should be able to sew his buttons back on.”

Jack said lamely, “Well, Saint Paul had to sew tents by hand, but perhaps the twins’ll lend us their machine.”

Even as he spoke, he hoped...

Colleen scoffed. “You’d break it, for sure.”

“Yo ho nope no we wouldn’t!” protested Joe, but not even his brothers believed him.

“Perhaps you could show us how to work it,” Jim proposed temptingly.

Colleen could not resist... “You’d need a lot more lessons than you ever had on your Land Rover. Then loftily, “If we sew for you, you can watch if you like.”

Thus she herself had neatly committed the twins to the boys’ grand project — if Mum agreed.

Mum did agree. So the twins and Nanna borrowed Jack’s diagrams and set off for the front room.

In the event, the boys were often called in for consultation — and to admire the progress.