

Chapter 31

Furthest South

AS THE NIGHT grew old and cooler, the six boys awoke, twisted, wriggled and contorted their bodies to get into blankets or bags. It didn't matter that it halved their padding. Unsuccessfully, they tried not to wake each other.

Ben, Ken and Steve were not used to early rising. But after sleeping so soundly, they made no plea to stay in bed — if you could you call a sleeping bag padded by a plastic sheet and cropped grass *a bed*.

At first light, there was a dew on the grass. Jack and Jim took this as omen for a hot day, and so it proved.

Jack led the prayers. The visitors seemed surprised. Clearly, they never did morning prayers at home, and said night prayers in bed.

Dressing? Just put on your hat, socks and boots...

They draped sleeping bags and blankets across the clothes-rope, to air them. The rope sagged, and they propped it in the middle with a forked stick.

After a token splash of water without soap on face and hands, they started cooking breakfast.

It was a high powered version of a *Terra Sancta* breakfast. The first course was porridge, with sugar and hot milk; then fried egg and bacon, eaten with rolls sliced in half, toasted and buttered; and a third course of more toasted half-rolls with butter and jam; all washed down with two mugs of tea. Jack insisted on getting plenty of liquid into them. There would be no repeat of the grim experience with Simon and Dominic.

'Breaking camp' took time, even with the tent left standing. Washing-up breakfast, stowing sleeping bags

and folding blankets, plus the lowlier needs of the body, then putting out the fire with water — it might have seemed ages except it kept them too busy to notice.

In his knapsack, Jack had tucker for lunch, plus two billies, all six mugs, dixies, but no bowls.

Ben's knapsack was empty except for Ken and Steve's inside it, plus the rope, which Jack threw in for emergencies: "You never know...", he reckoned.

"It's no burden," Jim told them, and we mightn't be back here till tomorrow." Then to Jack. "Blankets and sleeping bags are stowed. What next?"

The others listened eagerly.

Jim had been hoping they would make another dash for Mount Zodiac. But it's no use fighting against the weather. Many an explorer has been defeated by heat or by cold — and lived to admit it, and to try again another day. Others have perished instead...

Jack spoke in his solemn tone. His dramatics were lost on his listeners. "Today, we'd better keep off the ridges and grab any shade that the valleys've got to offer. And a chance to cool off in the creek. So we might explore downstream, and go further south than we've ever been — but not too rough and tough."

Jim was secretly relieved. Jack's plan was a modest challenge and within their powers. Well, well, well? Just down Koala Creek? He grinned, and robbed his mild rebuke of sting. "That map Greg's mother offered us would've helped, but *you* wouldn't allow it."

Jack grinned. "*Our* maps are not made by cheating — though I *did* copy a few vital bits onto ours."

Jim protested. "Aha, theft of mental property."

"No," said Jack, "merely heeding native rumours." What brothers! The visitors goggled.

Jack went on. "There's two more pools after The

Thunderfall and Big Bogie: there's Duckie, that Greg and Bernie have always used and where their big brother taught 'em to swim, and further down is Koala Pool. I think there's a big creek coming in just before it." And defensively, "All good explorers use native rumours. So we do, too." Then his counter-attack. "Have you put a peg in the sun-clock-compass, to mark breakfast?"

Guilty Jim was quite unabashed. He spoke loftily, with fake haughtiness. "I've already forgiven myself for the delay," and he went off to do it.

After that, they moved off: Jim first, next Joe, then Steve, Ben, Ken, with Jack as rear-guard.

From Grandfather Gum Tree it was all new to the visitors. And they revelled in it, which gave much pleasure to the Lawsons to share their joy.

The Narrows occasioned the first accident for the day. Ben came another cropper, slipping on rocks. He got up, hugging his side in pain.

Jim had half expected it. "Bruised your rib cage, eh? I hope you didn't bust anything in the knapsack?"

Jack was more sympathetic. "Does it hurt to take big breaths?" No, it didn't, so they moved on.

As they were about to emerge onto Koala Creek, Jim cautioned them to silence.

A mere glance into the pool at The Thunderfall was enough... He called back to Jack, "All clear and all's well. The Shy Spy Triplets aren't here."

Jim lead them to the right, slightly upstream, to the stepping stones. "Careful," he cautioned. "It's dangerous. Concentrate on what you're doing."

Steve was on the middle stepping stone of the five, yapping over his shoulder to Ben. He slipped, yelled, lost balance and his footing, screamed in terror, twisted, and hit the water in a side-buster.

It was knee deep and flowing fast, gathering speed for its great leap into emptiness. Even a boy standing up in it might be swept off his feet — to his doom.

It was a life-and-death crisis! The Thunderfall was a deluge, a pile-driver, pounding on the rocky shelf beneath, to smash every bone in a body and then drown it for good measure! And Steve was in its clutches...

Provisionally, both he and Jim were quick witted.

Steve knew his life was at stake and in a split second heeded Jim's shriek, "YOUR STAFF!"

Wildly, Steve swung his staff round, roughly towards the shout. Joe grabbed it and held on. But the pull on it — holding a bigger boy in that torrent! He began to totter. He dropped his own staff. Swish! it was gone.

Steve's hat was swept off. Swish! Zip! Gone.

Jim speared his own staff ashore. He jumped to Joe's stepping stone, and steadied him with an encircling arm.

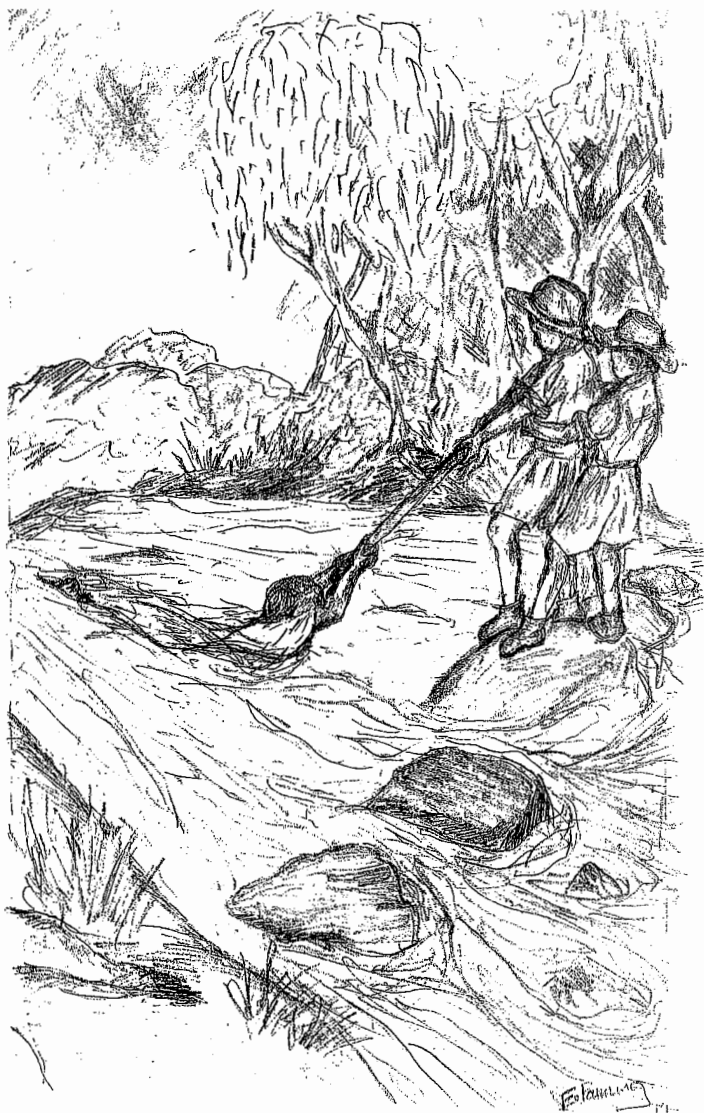
Jim swapped Joe's end of Steve's staff to his own right hand. He yelled in Joe's ear. "I've got him. You hold on to me. Got your balance?" Yes, Joe had — Jim could tell by the fierceness of Joe's clutch.

Above the thunder of the falls, he trumpeted to Steve: "HOLD ON!"

And Steve did hold on, as tight as tight.

Jim hauled Steve closer. With Steve's help, he got him round to the upstream side. All the while, Jim and Joe juggled their balance like clumsy dancers.

Meanwhile, Jack was still standing on solid ground. He roared at Ken and Ben: "COME BACK!" White with fright, they came. Then Jack hopped, stepped and jumped to the third stone, the one Steve fell from, as a backstop to Jim, his own staff at the ready.



STEVE HELD ON, AS TIGHT AS TIGHT

Jim could tell when it was safe to let go Steve, and jumped to the fifth stone, the one nearest the far bank.

He turned and beckoned. Again, Steve held out his staff, the staff which had saved his life.

Jim hauled Steve to the last stepping stone. Then Jim jumped to the far bank, and repeated his performance to haul Steve ashore.

Joe followed at once, skippety hop.

Jack jumped back, stone by stone, to the starting point. "Quick! Get the rope out," he told Ben. He cast off the locking knot and heaved it across to Jim. It was coiled ready to throw and did not kink.

Jack and Jim held the rope as a hand-rail. Ben and Ken skipped safely over the five stones. Jack followed, after dropping his end of the rope. Jim hauled in and coiled it. What to do next? Jack shone at relief work.

Cheerfully he reassured Steve, "We'll dry you out."

Joe led the way down the stony ramp to the foot of the Falls. Jack steadied Steve, "Just in case," but Steve protested he was, "Okay". Nevertheless, Jack kept a close eye on him. Ben and Ken followed.

Jack played it safe. With the day hotting up, he waved Joe to the stepping stones at the lower end of the pool, to cross over to the shady side. These stones were closer set and less dangerous if you slipped.

Jim fished Steve's hat out of the lower rapids, and Joe retrieved his staff. Jack said dryly, "Just as well his specs stuck — I'd hate to hunt for the bits."

Jim lit a roaring fire, Joe put on the billy — no fire without a cuppa — while the others hunted for wood. Steve wrung out his clothes and hung them on a wigwam of sticks made by Jack near the fire.

Everyone worked. Such teamwork, of which all

were an honourable part, was an education for Lahdidar.

Steve seemed no worse from his brush with death — just reddish scrapes, but no deep scratches or bruises.

Jack didn't need to say, "How about a swim?" The others guessed it and were undressing already. They stood along the ledge under the Falls. The deluge thundered on them. Their common thought was, "This is where Steve would have gone SPLAT! for ever!"

Jack caught Ken's eye and pointed. He didn't mean for Ken to dive... but Ken struck out at speed for the lower end. The others followed.

Jim kept one eye on the billy. Once it steamed, he nodded to Jack, who yelled, "All out!"

They pulled on their shorts, nibbled their biscuit ration of two each, and sipped hot sweet tea.

Steve stood close to the fire, steaming his shorts.

The others did their usual drying tricks with hot air and a touch of shirt tails, and got dressed.

Jack held Steve's shirt to the fire, as close as he could without singeing it. He lent Steve his own shirt to get dry on. Steve's shirt was still damp when he dressed — and so was Jack's.

They tanned mouths and throats with scalding tea, sluiced water on the fire, packed up and moved off.

That ended the Second Saga for the day.

Quickly they picked up speed. Joe led the march, next Jim with Ben's knapsack, Ben and Ken, with Steve just in front of Jack in the rear-guard. The new boys soon found that, amid rocks and scrub, no one could walk abreast, even on the faint track.

Just upstream of the Big Bogie were more stepping stones. Cheerful Jim told everyone, "We don't care if you fall in here — unless it's Jack with the bread rolls."

Steve seemed recovered. "How about a swim?"

Jack ruled it out. "Wait till we get to Duckie. But we'll show you the cave."

That meant two more sets of stepping stones. Jim told himself it was good practice for clumsy boys.

Like the earlier visitors, Ben, Ken and Steve were deeply moved at the glory of the Wild Bush Mountains. Caves and cooking fires, creeks and cool-offs, everything so wild. They envied Jack, Jim and Joe for living in a boys' wonderland. TV trivia or DVDs paled their insignificant fires alongside this. And the Lawsons seemed to have unbounded freedom to enjoy it to the full.

Moving off meant more practice on the two sets of stones. Jack and Jim noted the new boys' improvement.

From here, it was a good track, but still not wide enough to walk side by side. It diverged to the right of the creek, rose a little, then plunged down through a defile or canyon.

Half-way down, Joe pulled up. "What's special here?" he challenged Ben, Ken and Steve.

They looked around and about.

Ben shrugged. "Nothing, except I like it."

Joe triumphantly pointed to the left cliff. A narrow crevice went in a little way. "*That's* the way to a girls' pool, The Mermaids' Pool. It's a secret entrance to a secret pool that's off the main track."

More wonderment! They moved off, at a brisker pace. "Nothing succeeds like success," muttered Jim.

Jack asked, "Hear Koala Creek again?"

Yes, they did!

After fifty metres, he added, "And here it is."

Shaded by shrubbery was shallow water with four flat stepping stones, about a metre apart.

Jack thought of saying it, but held his tongue. Joe exercised no such restraint. Gleefully he told the new

boys, "This is where Jim came a cropper showing off doing Olympic high jumps from stone to stone and cut his head open. Blood everywhere! It was fun."

Jim was too good-natured to resent it. Besides, it might make Steve feel better about being a goof.

The track swung away from Koala Creek and soon Joe pulled up again. "Here's the T-intersection," he told them. "Here's where the Cumberland girls turn left to go home." Again he challenged them. "Now tell us what can you see?"

Lahdidar lacked the Lawsons' power of observation. They missed detail. They shrugged. "Nothing," they admitted. "Should we?"

Jack and Jim chuckled. Joe pointed at the faded notice nailed up a big tree on their right.

Ken read it aloud. "BOYS—GIRLS, but what for?"

On this, Joe was a bit hazy, so Jim took over. "The families at *The Hills of Home* before the Cumberlands had many boy and girl visitors. The notice told girls to turn right to The Mermaids' Pool and boys left to Ducky. That was a long while ago, before Greg an' Bernie made a track direct to Duckie. You'll see."

"Lead on, Joey," called Jack. And to the new boys. "None of us 've ever been here before." Then to Joe again. "And watch out for snakes, Jim."

"Why tell him?" puzzled Ken. "He's not in front."

"See how this track's overgrown?" said Jack. "Joe can't look far ahead dodging branches, so Jim'll keep watch over Joe's shoulder."

Steve was wondering aloud. "But why's this more overgrown than the last bit?"

Jim explained. "Greg and Bernie don't use it any more. They've a direct track to Duckie and the girls a direct track to the T-junction and Mermaids' Pool."

The overgrown track was harder work. Swishy branches whipped back from one boy to another.

Jim took care not to whip Ben. He either warned him or held them till Ben could grab them himself.

Ben, Ken and Steve lacked the foresight: Ben whacked Ken, Ken whacked Steve, but Jack was too shrewd to let Steve's branches whack him.

It was hard to dodge a whip-back when the path was so cluttered with logs and sticks. Jack warned them, "Don't jump down off a log — make sure there's not a snake on the far side."

Finally, they came to Ducky. Jim and Joe wanted to press on. Jim pleaded with Jack. "We've never bin to Koala Pool, and the visitors are holding out well."

But the visitors needed consulting. One look at the tree trunk across the lower end of the pool was enough for Ken. He enthused, "I could DIVE off that!"

It made Jack uneasy. He remembered Greg's father's strictures on diving.

Ben and Steve also liked it. "We could jump off with big splashes!"

Jack was decisive. "We'll have lunch here. It'd be a lot longer getting home from Koala Pool, and Dad and Mum'd like us early, to hear all about it. Oh, and we owe it to the twins to do our own jobs."

So they swung into the lunch routine. "The billy'll boil and the bacon can sizzle while we're swimming," declared a grinning Jim.

The bacon? Oh yeah, Jack had forgotten. They had lots, thanks to the generosity of Ben's parents.

Chapter 32

Energetic Exploration

BEN, KEN AND STEVE threw themselves into helping get lunch — finding sticks for the Cumberland's stone fireplace, then a fire under the billies.

Jack tried a new way of cooking bacon. He put six big rashers into the smaller dixie, added a spoonful of water, fitted the larger dixie on top, and flicked the pair upside down, so the flames could not lick inside the bigger dixie. It was a rough oven. Such thin metal would burn out under fierce heat, so he sat it at the edge of the fire. If it wasn't cooked when they finished their swim, he'd sizzle it in the dixies as frying pans.

Meanwhile Jim strung-up the rope, muttering, "Bush Boy Explorers *must* have a rope." He made coat-hanger sticks to go on drying Steve's things.

Joe organized the new boys. "Break the rolls in half like this," he ordered, "then butter 'em." In other company, he might have applied the runny butter with a dirty forefinger. Instead, he got the knife from Jack and set Ben to whittle sticks into butter scrapers — "Saves a knife getting butter in its guts," he told them, though his mother would have preferred 'hinges'. His final direction was, "An' Ken an' Steve, put the buttered rolls in the shade where ants can't get 'em" — though he knew such places are next to impossible to find.

Joe himself dosed the mugs with milk powder and sugar. "I've measured it *exactly* so yous can stir it."

With the makings of a meal underway, they draped sweaty clothes on the rope. Steve used the hangers.

Ken ran out the log and dived cleanly. He surfaced several metres away. It was impressive.

However, the others did not notice at first. Ken, superior swimmer though he be, had scraped his forehead on the rough bottom, as he arched his back to curve upwards. He was not used to bush pools.

Everyone else 'bombed in' with satisfying splashes, and swam lazily about. Only then did Jack and Jim notice Ken's bruised forehead. With growing consciousness of 'Safety First', they rebuked him.

Anyhow, the water felt mighty good, and so refreshing after walking in heat and perspiration.

After five minutes, Jack swam out to check the fire, billies and bacon. After another five minutes, Jim did the checking.

Despite a bit of a tan from earlier sunburn, Jack and Jim could feel new burning. "Time for lunch," urged Jack, "even though it's early." He glanced at the sun. "Still long before midday." It was a short swim.

They dried and dressed. The new boys were careless of their socks. They dropped them in the sand. The Lawsons knew better. "Shake the sand out," began Jim. Cheerfully, he changed it to a threat. "Or you'll limp all the way home with yer big blisters busting."

Jack added mournfully, "We'd have to carry you."

To himself, Joe was thinking, "An' serve you right, yo ho yep yes!" while hoping fervently not to piggy-back even the smallest, who was Ken.

"You beaut!" yelled Jack. "The bacon's just crisp, not dry crackle nor half-cooked, but juicy." With his growing leadership skills, Jack got Steve to say grace.

They chewed bacon rolls and 'chewed' their tea with relish. After that were more half-rolls, with butter, jam and dates, a sort of dessert without custard.

Jack glanced at Jim. Previously, they had planned to return home, not via their camp in Paradise but by

Cubby's Canyon. Now he had a more daring idea.

"We've just got enough time for a bit of extra exploring. Remember, Jim? Last week, Greg Cumberland told us about King's Cave and how it's easy to get there from here. Then there's a quick way from it to Big Bogie which dodges the swish-back bushes along the creek. An' we might get in a swim in the shady part of Big Bogie or else at The Thunderfall." Jim nodded his OK.

Washing up greasy dixies was by 'sand and hand'. Jack followed this with boiling water, scourer and soap. Jim coiled the rope and packed the knapsacks. Joe got the others to rinse the mugs. "Good training for yers," he told them. He enjoyed having someone to boss.

Jack was conscientious about the log books. Left to himself, even Jim might have 'forgot' them, and, alas, quite deliberately. As for Joe, he needed no conscious effort to forget anything, and then shrug off rebukes with a sloppy grin and "I forgot."

Ben, Ken and Steve, however, were as agreeable as ever. All six boys recognized that the price of bush freedom had to be paid in grown-up currency, and at this stage was something rather like school work.

Where they were sitting lacked shade. And no one could sprawl propped up on his elbow to write, let alone lie flat to snooze.

Jim suggested, "Let's cross the log and get under the trees." This also turned out uncomfortable — there was no clearing, only great flags of rock standing on their end, and lots of thick scrubby growth into which they thrust their solid persons.

Jack and Jim's Log Book entries were to the point: how they had got there; and much toned-down account of what happened on the way; plus a detailed map of

Duckie and general additions to their map at home.

Joe did not tone-down *his* account. He drew Steve leaning out backwards over The Thunderfall held by his staff with Joe on the other end. As he sketched, he chanted, "Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!" as a variant on his usual blather. His brothers made no comment.

Steve's entry did not mention his near-death saga. Instead, he drew a picture of the BOYS-GIRLS signpost and the tree trunk over Duckie. Ben and Ken looked over his shoulder and copied shamelessly. Such selective reporting sidesteps parental anxieties and evades criticisms. Such is diplomacy. Such is life.

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They dozed lightly, enough at least to count as a rest and out of the sun. Actually, the hot day was cooling and they were invigorated for what came next.

Jack himself led them up a dry creek bed. 'A forest of shadows,' Greg had called it. Indeed, there were still traces of scrub bashed down by Greg's party. They tripped on hidden rocks and roots. As well, there were swish-back branches and jabbing jagged sticks. 'Rip ya' lawyer vines made deep painful scratches.

It was a very solid bout of scrub bashing — and much worse than going along Koala Creek.

Jack changed the order of march. He put himself, Jim and Joe in front, ahead of Ben, Ken and Steve. Thus Steve had his first turn as rear-guard.

"Short cuts make long delays," muttered Jim.

Jack now recalled that Greg's group had suffered this awful non-perennial creek on their way back. So he angled up the right bank, and found easier going on a sidling¹ until the non-perennial itself petered out.

1 A sideling is a negotiable route or track along the side of a ridge.



VANISHING INTO THE TREES

From the front of the line, he was the first to spot the big cave set in a cliff on the rising slope above them.

Yet at that very moment, Joe, the third in line, spied Something Else. Indeed, it was Someone Else — actually, a pair of Someones.

What with their several sightings of the Shy Spy Triplets, the Lawsons, too, were growing cagey. Joe did not shout. Rather, in a stage whisper — akin to a gale in the treetops — he hissed, “Look! and pointed a quivering finger. Two boys were vanishing into the trees, well up the slope above the cave, on its right.

Forget it! King’s Cave was their priority and they’d found it. They gazed up into its dark opening above a narrow ledge in front. The very setting made it darkness more mysterious, even threatening, yet so alluring.

They’d found it! Jim thought of Paterson’s *The Road to Hogan’s Gap*, and its tangle of impossible landmarks like, ‘The second right hand ridge’, or the carcasses of ‘Hogan’s Bull’ and ‘Hogan’s Old Grey Mare’. Most fatal of all are directions which conclude, ‘You can’t miss it...’ In that case, you’re sure to! You’ll never find it!

So Jim said a heartfelt, “Congratulations, Jack.”

Jack skirted to the left of the lower cliff and they clambered up onto the ledge and along it.

A fat death adder slithered away.

Jim told them, “Death adders wait till you tread on them, then quick-sticks bite you deady-bones.” Hmmp!

Ben and Ken were nery of snakes. Steve challenged the identification: “How do you know it’s a death adder?”

Jim smiled, “We’ve got Eric Worrell’s book on snakes.”

Inside the cave, their eyes had to adjust to less light, but found it large and cheerful. Though the floor was peppered with many boot prints, their focus was on the back wall and the rough-carved words ‘King’s Cave’, the faint

skull, crossed pistols, and the initials of long dead boys.

They flopped down in a semi-circle to recover from the final scramble and lick their wounds (which Joe did literally) and admire the view over the treetops below.

Joe passed round Anzac biscuits to fuel their talk.

Jim led off. "We all saw 'em: two boys, a bit older than us — small knapsacks, no hats, one in long pants, so they can't be our Shy Spy Triplets."

Jack added shrewdly, "You'd need a knapsack even for a day-walk." Then he made allowances. "Unless you had a mug on your belt and food in your pocket."

Joe was argumentative. "They might cup up water like the Gideons, an' pockets is too small for food, yo ho yep yes!"

Jack admitted, "They might've iron rations in bulging pockets... You know, dates and biscuits?"

Then Joe's healthy imagination outstripped all other speculations. "Maybe they bowl over rabbits with rocks, or make bows 'an shoot down birds or jump on snakes and eat 'em raw — yo ho yep yes, I would."

Jim teased. "Have you heard the one about chewing grass seeds into mash? sitting in the water up to your neck? spitting out morsels of mash? and, when the fish gather round, clang two round river rocks together under water to make a shock wave to stun the fish and they float on the surface, waiting for you to pick'em up?" For good measure, he threw in, "And you rub sticks to make a fire to cook 'em, and do it all in four hours."

He thought that would silence Joe. Not a hope.

Joe countered, "Well, let's try it — you show us."

The charms of the mighty bush plus enthusiasm and lessons from the Lawsons bore fruit. Ken said, "We oughta follow 'em and tell 'em what to do."

"I'd love to explore up there," Jack admitted

wistfully. "But there's no time for it today."

Ben, too, was enthusiastic. "Then tomorrow?"

Jack gave his rare grin. "The grown-ups'd say, 'We'll see,' to fob us off. But we're not grown-up so we jolly well will if it's cool enough for a tiger walk."

Ken pleaded ignorance. "What's a tiger walk?"

Joe combined his teasing with romance. "It's riding kangaroos to hunt Australian tigers with spears."

Jim mimicked him. "Yo ho yep yes. You mean Tasmanian Tigers, you do. Well, they're extinct, even in Tassie. And they've not been sighted on the mainland since the late 19th century."

They were still digesting this as Jim went on, "They're savage big marsupial cats with tiger-stripes an' their females 've got a rear-opening pouch."

Facts did not quench Joe. "I bet I catch one. They're cunning with a rule 'not to show' when folk are around — but I'll catch two and breed 'em."

Jim gave up...

* * * *

Jack was racking his memory. Greg had first got to King's Cave another way, looking for the lost, when the clouds glowed green and it hailed. It was the very track they had gone up with Mick, Rick and Phil last Saturday, coming up from the canyon near Mermaids' Pool and Big Bogie.

Again, he took the lead himself, with Jim as rear guard. By this time, the sun was at its hottest and the new boys were wilting. Valiant as they were, they lacked the staying power of the Lawsons.

As the group straggled across the slope to find the ridge down to the creek, Jack threw some encouragement over his shoulder: "We'll swim at Big Bogie, have a cuppa and a rest, and go home by Koala Spur."

Their ragged cheering soothed their battered spirits.

Jack's fixation on finding a track misled him, for the backbones of ridges are often not so clear.

He led them down an animal pad by mistake. It waxed and waned as such tracks do. Fortunately, they came out on Koala Creek at a spot they recognized, the stepping stones where Jim had cracked his head.

From here it was easy: up through the canyon, with its branch track to Mermaids' Pool, then gathering firewood as they went, and across both sets of stepping stones to the cave at Big Bogie.

Here followed the usual breaking sticks, lighting up, setting the billy, rope for hanging clothes...

In the pool, they kept in the shade and took it easy.

Invigorated, dried and dressed, they brewed tea, sipped it with satisfaction and dunked the last of the Anzac biscuits. The Lawsons were pleased that the 'not so softies' from Lahdidar were enjoying it.

Jack reckoned the time was half past three, and they set off up the familiar ridge, with Ken in front. Their repeated visits to Big Bogie meant Koala Spur had the beginnings of their own bushy track.

The sun still had sting. Ken set a non-racing pace. Jim came just behind him, to watch for snakes, and Jack took another turn as rear-guard.

At the passion fruit vines, they picked four knapsacks full. Through a mouthful of sweet seedy juice, Jim explained, "I've gotta" — he swallowed — "keep checking they're properly ripe." Of course.

The Tumbledown was a slow uphill plod but, once on the level, they strode it out, this time with Steve as pace-setter. "He's got his goggles on," chortled Joe, "so he won't get lost, yo ho nope no."

At the sliprails and across the home paddock they

let loose a medley of cheerful coo-ees.

Ben looked concerned. "They might think we calling for help..."

Jack quoted Joe. "Yo ho nope no." And he added proudly, "Mum's got an ear for music. She's an expert at telling rage from pain — and triumph from disaster."

Their whoops attracted Kanga, who romped out with cheerful barks to lick them. The boys tramped inside.

Mum and Nanna were having a cuppa with Dad, who had just walked in from work.

Mum's lurking fears were once again allayed. "Good! All's well, you're safely home, thank The Lord!"

Dad saw the bulging knapsacks. "Heaven help us — I thought you'd come back with empty knapsacks."

"Passion fruit!" Joe announced triumphantly.

Over a cuppa, the boys relived the past twenty four hours or so, and even more gloriously.

This time, Jim was the thoughtful one: "We orta save our reports for tea time — I mean the convivium — when the girls are here. Where are they, anyway?"

Mum explained, "The twins've taken Bess for a swim in your Little Bogie. They'll be pleased because they were hoping you'd be back early to do the jobs."

Jim glanced at the clock and wrote on the whiteboard: 'Back at 1600'. He glanced at his brothers. "How about we leave Ben, Ken and Steve in here to tell 'em what's what? We can start on the jobs?"

Jack agreed. "They need a rest more than we do."

"Yo ho yep yes," crowed Joe. "And I've gotta check the chooks — girls don't understand chooks..."

Chapter 33

A Convivial Convivium

BEN, Ken and Steve enjoyed being pumped by the grown-ups. Finally, they decamped, and joined Jack, Jim and Joe in their family jobs. This left 'the oldies' free to discuss lot of them at their leisure.

Tired as he was, Ben joined Jack at the woodheap. After a brief lesson, he worked like a Trojan on the bow-saw. This left Jack free to race the barrowloads into the house and put distilled water in the electric batteries.

Ken helped Jim yard Buttercup and Bubs. Jim deftly hunted Buttercup out while Ken swung the gate shut against the calf. This left the cow to feed and make milk for the family's breakfasts. Her cow instinct would prompt her to make extra for the calf.

They filled the old bath-tub on the low grade swamp water. They shovelled up manure into a convenient heap for the garden.

"What about the horses?" asked Ken.

"The twins like to do them," was the reply.

After that, Jim and Ken helped at the woodheap and split the sawn logs into sizeable fuel for the hot water stoves. "The cooking stove can run on the bigger stuff," explained Jim, "because it's going all the time."

Joe introduced Steve to the chooks. Tommy and Billy, 'the littlies', came out to check, supervise and prattle. They had a proprietorial interest in the chooks.

Tommy reminded his brother, "Fill the water trough, Joe," and he and Billy had a final check for eggs at an hour far too late for any self-respecting hens.

Tommy went on to inform Steve, "They always sing when they lay." No victory song had sounded since

morning, so clearly these closely supervised hens would lay no more that day, but it was the right thing to check.

Ben was trusted to light the boiler out on the verandah, for the main bathroom of the indoor folk.

Meanwhile, the Lawsons polished their boots. Ken, guided by Jim, had put a fire under a laundry copper for the boy's showers. Joe brought in Steve so he could explain the overhead shower buckets.

Jack quoted Greg Cumberland's words: "My Dad says your Lawson showers are tons better than sponge baths in the bush and remind him of army camps."

The new boys were surprised to be told they should dress in pyjamas for the main meal at five o'clock.

* * * *

The seating at the big kitchen table required more than the usual juggling. Mum, however, was an expert. After all, Nanna had tutored her. She added an extra table for the littlies, where Tilly would mother them. This made three extra places, with a fourth visitor to be squeezed in along one side.

Colleen and Kathleen, ably assisted by Bess, dished out food onto hot plates laid out on the benches alongside the sinks. They insisted on Mum and Nanna being seated. The boys sped the plates to the tables. Before anything could get cold, everyone had a plate and Dad had said grace.

There was steaming hot corned beef with white onion sauce, mashed potato, carrot and spinach. It was good plain fare. They chewed it up with the greatest relish.

Dad now made a speech. "Ben, Ken and Steve, I welcomed Bess last night and now I welcome you." Then he explained that their meal was *a convivium* because the reporting and listening made it *convivial*.

The visitors did not let these foreign words upset the

taste of the food. They didn't care what you called it.

Bess made the first reports. She exulted over the deeper pool at Little Bogie — the one in which Joe had almost drowned his brothers and himself, though the rest of the family had never been informed...

"Yous are pretty sunburnt," observed Joe. He was heartily 'SSshed' by the girls and grown-ups.

Then Jim and Joe gave the briefest possible reports on the technical details of their 24 hours in the bush.

Ben led for the visiting boys and was considerate in leaving things for Ken and Steve to say.

Colleen, the planner, raised a vital concern. "Dad," she said, "How are we going to fit everyone in the van to get to Mass tomorrow? It only holds twelve..."

Dad praised her astuteness. "Good on you, Coll, for thinking of it. However, it's all under control" — he glanced at Joe. "Yo ho yep yes it is! Jack will drive the Land Rover with the other campers to his legal limit at Wombat Parade — the whole of Swampy Ridge Road is on Luigi's private property. From there, the boys can walk to the Castonellis' business complex. Mum and I'll follow with everyone else. Mrs Castonelli has kindly offered to take the twins, Bess and Tilly, which will leave us three seats for the extra boys. Mr Castonelli won't be coming: He 'regrets that must stay to sell customers early morning petrol.' Ah well..."

Joe hissed at the visitors across the table: "He doesn't come even on Sundays — *he's a lazy Catholic!* Yo ho yep yes he is."

This expression of Dad's was banned by Mum, who always hastened to correct it. She frowned at Joe, then said, "He's a lax Catholic and we're praying for him."

The visitors nodded sympathetically.

Jim also showed his shrewdness. "Aren't the girls

going to bring back one of the Mahoneys? How do we fit her in?"

Dad replied smoothly, "I like having such good planners in the family — a credit to your mother and Nanna's tutoring. Well, Mrs Castonelli has a twin-cab ute with a bench seat in front. She can fit in an extra girl driving back, all okay and legal. I'll be going to work so Mum'll be driving the van home. She'll pick up the girls from Mrs Castonelli at Guntawang, and Jack'll drive the boys in the Land Rover."

It was a neat solution, thanks to Mrs Castonelli.

"No human sardines," chortled Jim, "like we had on the floor of the van last Sunday..."

"Not the floor, but our laps and dresses, you mean," corrected Colleen, but with a kind glance at the littlies.

In what was for her a rare quip, Kathleen beamed on Jim. "You're such a bendable brother."

Colleen knew she meant flexible, but said nothing.

* * * *

After the meal, the boys were first in to the Creation School Room. Its very name intrigued the visitors, as also did the motto printed on a strip of cardboard high on the right hand wall: *Come and see the works of God — heaven and earth are full of His glory.*

Ben expressed his puzzlement. "I don't think I've ever heard that idea before." It was a new way of looking at things for all the visitors.

On the other hand, Joe was puzzled at their puzzlement. Surely this was basic?

"It's in the Bible and the Mass," Jack told them.

"But who stuck it up?" Jim wanted to know.

"I did," answered Mum as she led the others in from the kitchen. She explained, "The idea of a watchword came from the Cumberland's schoolroom at *The Hills*

of Home. They've got a catechism answer."

Dad added, "Well, ours is to remind us that in here we learn about God and our God-given dignity, duty and destiny. That's religion lessons. In science and geography, we learn about His world. In history, in stories, in poems and music, we study human exploits in response to God's plan — or against it."

This was quite mind-blowing. And it made it easier to kneel at the Family Altar. Here Tilly had already lit the candles for the Rosary.

Noble themes of watchwords and mysteries were soon sullied. Jim criticized Tilly's use of matches; Tommy and Billy squirmed, wriggled and poked each other; but a look from Dad brought them all to heel.

After that, Mum and Nanna took the littlies off for a bedtime story. Dad retired to his desk in the big bedroom where he finished planning his maths lessons for Friday. Seldom did he bring work home, for he did his marking in free periods, "in the company's time", as he described it. If he marked books on the train, he left them with the station master to save lugging them home on foot and carting them back next day.

With Colleen in charge, the older boys and girls washed up. Bess, Ben, Ken and Steve were amazed. The Lawson boys, and even Joe, did what she told them, and at once. It was quite outside their expectations.

They sang, too, while they worked. Brief orders were issued by gesture or between songs. The repertoire ranged from rumbustuous to religious, from *Mary had a William Goat*¹ to the *Gloria in Missa de Angelis*. The visitors struggled with the words and mainly tended to hum the tunes.

1 See *Bush Boys and Bush Rangers* p. 233.

Washing up was actually pleasant. Bess chuckled. "It's more a choir than a chore."

Then the phone rang. Dad was expecting it. The mobile phone was in the hall, where the wire came down from the outdoor aerial.

He returned to the kitchen. "Bess and Ben, your Dad and Mum are on time. When I rang them yesterday to say you'd arrived safely, they agreed to relay our news to Ken and Steve's parents and ring at 1740 tonight."

Joe interpreted. "1740 means twenty to six, post meridian." Jack and Jim laughed, especially at 'p.m.'

Later, Bess and Ben reported to the others. Their mother had quizzed Bess. "Are you well? What have you been doing? Is Ben behaving himself? Is he dirty from not washing? Are the Lawson boys too rough for him? Have they got lost yet? Have you worn out your welcome?" Bess reassured her on all issues.

Then their Dad came on to speak to Ben. "How's the wild bush? What do you eat? Is Jack a good leader? Have you seen any snakes? Had any accidents? Are you behaving yourself? Has Mr Lawson whacked you yet?" Ben's Dad, too, was reassured on all points, plus the extra information that Ken was their star swimmer. "What do you swim in?" Ben had answered, "In Paradise Pool" — it sounded better than 'a dam' — "and at the pool below The Thunderfall and at Duckie." His Dad chuckled at the names, especially Duckie. He knew the code for pools called Duckie.

He asked Ben to fetch Mr Lawson. They spoke briefly and after that Mrs Lawson had a longer 'chin wag' with Ben and Bess's mother.

The washing up was fizzling out just as Dad came back. With his cheery grin, he asked, "Well, what are your plans for tomorrow?"

The visitors half-sensed that the incredible freedom of the Lawson boys and girls, to 'do as they liked' in the bush, was balanced by intangible parental influences.

When the Lawsons had lived among them, Lahdidar and Boxwatch parents, mostly with only one or two children, had tut-tutted at the Lawsons' freedom to roam, and overlooked their responsibility for family jobs.

On the other hand, the visitors' surprise at their freedom puzzled Jack, Jim and Joe. They were used to Dad's permissive approach with its hidden strictures. Was it not normal? "All we've gotta do is polish our boots and say our prayers." In reality, they had to say where they were going, when they would be back, and always to look after each other and keep together.

Colleen spoke first. "After Mass and breakfast, we'll do the laundry." She turned to Bess. "Here at *Terra Sancta*, Kath an' I are 'Human washing machines' which is an upmarket name for a washerwoman."

Jack and Jim wondered if she was poking fun at Lahdidar's supposed superiority? But Bess took no offence.

Then Kathleen took up the running. "Well, Dad, if it's hot, we're riding the ponies out to the passion fruit, and even further if the ponies don't mind the wild bush. Later we'll have another swim at Little Bogie and play tennis in the afternoon and take the washing off and help Mum and Nanna get tea."

Jack went next. First he glanced at Ken, Ben and Steve, then told Dad. "Jim an' I have planned a tiger walk. It's exploring cross-country to Mount Zodiac. That's the cone-shaped one you can see from the roof-room. Greg told us its name. Its top has a panorama view. So we'll race down to Little Bogie ahead of the girls, and keep going on a compass course, up and over,

till we get to Zodiac."

Jim continued, "Whichever way we come back, we'll finish up at Paradise and sleep in our tent."

Joe, however, pictured difficulties for himself. "You mean we're going to carry all the food for" — he counted on his fingers — "four meals for six boys? The knapsacks'll be too heavy for me to carry — yo ho yep yes!"

As usual, Jack soothed him. "Joe, the rest of us need *you* to travel light as our trailblazer. Jim an' me and the others 'll 'ave to take all the turns at the heavy loads." Jack winked at Jim.

Jim added, "So no-one'll be overworked."

Dad thanked them all and suggested they get an early night for their big day tomorrow. "And no pillow fighting! or the guilty will be 'severely dealt with'."

Ben asked, "Mr Lawson, may we have a quick look at Mount Zodiac from the room-on-the-roof, please?"

Dad smiled. "You work that out with Jack."

So it was that Jack hooked up the ladder and led Ben, Ken and Steve into the ceiling.

Steve grumbled, "Oh! It's dark in here."

"Up top it's more so," Jack assured him. They went up a second ladder, through another trapdoor, and into the pitchy dark of the shuttered roof-room.

Jim called up from the top of the first ladder. "Me an' Joe won't come — it'll leave you more room."

Jack lowered the trapdoor to save the visitors from falling down the hole from which they had emerged.

He opened the hinging shutters and propped them up. Late afternoon sunlight flooded in. The view to the southeast was just perfect.

"Wow!" cried Steve, quite forgetting to argue or criticize. "What a view!" The cone of Mount Zodiac stood up proudly among the peaks of lesser splendour,



INSIDE THE CEILING

such as the Twin Peaks at *The Hills of Home*.

Jack pointed to places the Bush Boy Explorers had been. He gave more detail than they could follow. At the same time, he was planning a general route through the jumble of ridges and gorges they aimed to traverse. From the top of the Southern Bulwark to Mount Zodiac there did seem to be a ridge running in a direct line, without kinks or up-and-downs.

Then from under the trapdoor came the grinding slide of the barrel bolt and muffled voices, "Gotcha! But we'll let yers out if you agree to a pillow fight."

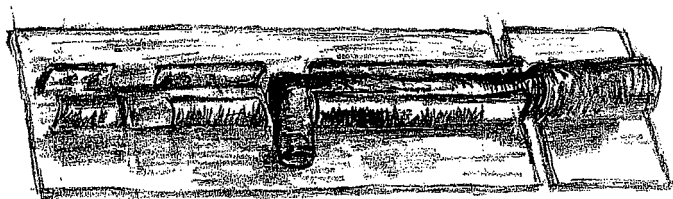
Jim and Joe! Jack knew. He shouted, "No! You let us out. If *they* hear us yelling, you'll have to own up, and you'll cop it for suggesting it!"

Chuckles of defiance were not promising.

Protests from the trapped boys went unanswered.

The Lawsons' friends had heard that, unlike themselves, the Lawsons got spanked for pillow fights. In fact, spankings were rare — the possibility was enough.

So Jack, Ben, Ken and Steve were imprisoned in a dungeon-on-a-roof, and night was fast coming on.



E. Fawcett

BARREL BOLT

Chapter 34 (Thu.7/12)

On the Brink of Disaster

MORE so than most boys, Ben, Ken and Steve tended to be shy, soft and sensitive. They were tractable with parents, polite with adults, and totally co-operative with Jack, Jim and Joe in their exploits.

However, after a day and a half with Jack, Jim and Joe, bodies toughened and a capacity for mischief grew.

Jack's wits, usually slower than Jim's, sped up in a crisis. Moreover, he did not let adversity annoy him.

The sides of the old-fashioned roof sloped up to a steep peak. The ridge capping on the south side had a walk-way, with handrails. But it did not go the whole way and there was a nasty drop at the far end. Their best hope was to the north.

Jack remembered: Dad had given one of his few direct orders: "Don't ever try climbing along the ridge cap. No one can stand upright on a smooth slope of 45°."

Yet extreme circumstances demand extreme measures, no matter the consequences, for better or for worse, for reward or for punishment.

Without hesitation he climbed pyjama-clad out the north-facing opening and stood bare-footed on the iron roof. He growled at the visitors. "Don't follow. Just wait. I'll climb down and come back up the ladders. Just wait till I get hold of Jim an' Joe! The horse trough for them, even if all us Lawsons get spanked for it..."

Without further ado, he lowered his feet, sat on the ridge cap, and swung himself round to face north — a tough call. Ben, Ken and Steve looked on in silence.

Jack hurled his last order over his shoulder, for he did not twist round to speak. "You stay put!"

His progress was lonely, scary. He used hands, feet and bottom to best advantage, aware that flimsy summer pyjamas could not save him from the jags and nails.

The others waited till he was half-way. A glance at each other and, without a word, they followed him.

A bellow of the family van starting up shattered the evening calm. Jack remembered: Dad was taking Nanna to a meeting at Guntawang to plan Sunday's Bush Dance.

The scary drop was bad enough for Jack. But for Ben, Ken and Steve, their thoughts were torture — "If I slide, I'll never stop!" — "The rough roof'll rip me!" — "I'll speed across the flat verandah roof!" "Whichever. I'll SPLAT on the ground, a twitching heap of bones..."

But sitting still was no help. Grimly they called up courage to forget fear and edge forward.

When the main roof ended in a sloping triangle down to the verandah roof, Jack had to dodge round the extension aerial of the mobile phone. Then a happy find! The ladder they had used to install the aerial was back in place. And he remembered. Dad had come up later to make fine adjustments. Thank Heaven! Even his best bare-foot grip might not have saved a fatal slide on 45°. A ladder made it just so easy.

He turned to get on the first rungs — and found himself face to face with Ben, Ken and Steve crowding close upon. He snarled, but reason said, 'All for the best' so he muttered, "Least said, soonest mended."

The ladder was roped to ring bolts on the verandah roof. Jack untied it, and six extra arms and muscles slid it down and over the gutter. Without help, it would have gone THUD as it speared into the ground, or CRASH-BANG as it toppled over out of control.

They raced down to the welcome ground. Ken

knelt piously to kiss it. Steve wiped the sweat off his spectacles and swore softly.

Jack said quietly. "Help me lower it." Steve put his foot on the bottom rung. Jack held a rung as high as his reach and walked backwards, shifting his grip to higher and higher rungs.

Carrying an end each, they set it down gently on the entrance verandah next the front door. Maybe Dad would think he'd left it there?

Anyway, no one came to challenge them. Phew!

They snuck along on the verandah floor boards, round the corner, past the empty lounge room, past the



PROGRESS MEANT EDGING FORWARD

littlies, past the twins' room, past Nanna's room — but she was out... Silently they opened the door to the closed-in part, then the door into the short cross-corridor where the door to their own room was ajar.

* * * *

The twins and Bess had been reading and only now put out their light. It was Colleen, of course, who saw the shadowy figures creeping by. She breathed the single word, "Look!" and pointed to the window. Kath and Bess got the briefest glimpse of ghostly shadows.

"We'll have to tell Dad," Colleen minced primly.

Even in the dark, she and Bess could *see* a mother's sweet little smile in Kathleen's whisper: "We can't! Only Nanna's here. Remember? Dad's taken Mum and Bridgee to the meeting about the Bush Fire Brigade Dance. Mum swapped with Nanna at the last minute to show the locals the baby. And *you* mustn't tell! Dad's got to *discover* it for himself, as he's always saying."

* * * *

Jim and Joe were already in bed, pretending to sleep.

Strangely, Joe's conscience, not Jim's, was smitten. He whispered, "We'd better see what they're doing. And if they've crawled along the roof, we'd better close the shutters in the roof room. Did you think of that?"

Jim was callous. "Nope — it can wait till morning."

* * * *

As Jack and the others came in, the guilty made snoring noises.

Jack needed no more than the dim starlight. He grabbed Jim's arm and yanked him from the top bunk with an almost dislocating jerk. It was just as well Jim was not asleep...

Ken was doing the same on a lower bunk for Joe.

Jim and Joe pretended indignation. Huh!

Already Ben was swinging his pillow. He clouted Jim. If it had been a club, it might have broke his neck. Then he waded in, hammer and tongs.

Like a match in spilt petrol, WHOOSH, at once the room was a whirlwind of fighting boys and pillows.

The chairs were against the walls. They got clouted, but without crashing over.

The light was too poor to see which boy was which. Everyone swiped anybody. For ten whole minutes...

It was invigorating. They felt much better.

They stopped to get their breaths. With unseen grins they groped for the water bottles. Gluggle-gluggle-gluggle they gulped it down.

Jack asked the same question as Joe. "Did you go back to close the shutters in the roof-room?"

Jim was brazen. "Nope," he declared. "Not my job." Then he felt ashamed and repented. How low he had sunk! "I'll do it now," he said. He *Ssshed* them with a finger to his lips, opened the door with infinite care, slithered out and closed it carefully.

Light from the kitchen reflected round the corners in the corridors. Mum would be there, guarding a house full of sleeping children, awaiting Dad and Nanna's return. He knew nothing of Mum's swap with Nanna.

Round into the main corridor crept Jim.

He raced up the two ladders.

* * * *

At that very moment, a shadowy figure emerged from the littlies' room. *Whoever it was* heard the patter of bare feet on the ladder, looked up and, in the gloom, spotted a wraith climbing into the roof-room.

* * * *

Slowly, lest the creaking hinges betray him, Jim closed the shutters and came down the second ladder...

But *Whoever-it-was* was waiting...

Jim was well and truly sprung.

"*Come to the kitchen,*" said a commanding whisper.

It was Nanna! Where on earth was Mum?

In the lighted kitchen, Nanna took a good look at him. His face was flushed, sweat glistened, pyjamas scuffled... She read the signs — pillow fighting!

And he knew that she knew! He tried to distract her. "I thought you went with Dad?"

"Your Mum did. Now what are *you* doing?"

* * * *

Jim raced back to the bedroom. He knocked their usual code, dah-di-dah, K, for 'okay, I'm back.'. S-O-S might have been more appropriate.

Inside, the others had paused in a second round of the pillow fight or they might not have heard him.

Jim gasped his news. "Nanna caught me coming down the ladder. She's in the kitchen and wants us all to come at once."

Consternation! Their faces fell!

Jack asked the vital question, at least, vital for the rest of them: "*Does she know about our pillow fight?*"

Jim look very worried. "She hasn't said so. All I've told her is that I locked you in the roof-room and left you to escape." He added, as might a man waiting for the hangman, "But I think she's guessed — so we've had it." Ben, Ken and Steve winced.

Ben grimaced. "I started the pillow fight. It's all my fault. I'll have to own up. What'll she *do*?"

Jim groaned. "The slipper!" He paused, "But I'm to blame, not any of yous. I started it all." He glanced at the others. "I'll try to get you off, but come on, let's get it over."

Their guilt sat heavy upon them. Shamefacedly

they slunk into the kitchen. Nanna was at the stove and seemed not to notice them. At least, she did not turn to greet them. With one hand she was stirring a saucepan of milk and with the other a mush of blended cocoa and sugar while the kettle made a simmering hiss.

Bread was browning into toast on the stove top.

Ben looked down at her slipped foot and winced.

After this ominous silence, she spoke. "Good boys! Please lend a hand with the toast and cocoa." Her tone was calm and pleasant, and lacked annoyance.

Jack moved in to butter the toast; Jim got the home-made jam and Vegemite; Joe got mugs and knives.

Then she said, "Sit yourselves down. I'm just so curious. I want to hear how you got off the roof."

With his mouth full of toast, Jim again confessed his mischief. Jack confessed his desperate venture against Dad's standing orders. Ben, Ken and Steve confessed disobeying Jack's direct command.

Of course, no one mentioned the pillow fight. Nor did she ask them. What a relief! Even Ben, Ken and Steve, who did not know her, could tell that no one was going to cop the slipper after all! Phew!

Her questions were about the vital details, things of interest only to an experienced climber, of danger and degrees of rashness.

Her only criticisms concerned their torn pyjama pants. "What's left of them is bit sketchy for polite company. You'd better leave them with me tomorrow."

She made such brisk and cheery conversation. She got them talking about their camp. Their tongues were loosened by goodwill, cocoa and toast. They revealed much that tact and reticence might well have concealed.

Clearly, she knew a lot about camping, and about boys and girls growing up in the country. Jack guessed

it was from her own childhood, and not from Uncle Wal's doings in the Scouts. No wonder she understood them so well, and was so kind as well as so firm.

She told them how she and her sister and their friends were setting up a rope to swing out over a swimming hole in a creek. "My sister said she'd do it. We'd throw the rope to her when she got to the branch above the water. She shinned up the lower trunk, sat on the branch, and froze with an attack of *nerves*" — here Nanna smiled at the memory, "what you'd call *scared*. She couldn't make herself move up or come down. What to do? Get a ladder? Fetch Mum? Either way, we'd be caught. We weren't allowed to climb trees in dresses. Mum'd have a fit. We'd get the... Well, what naughty girls got in the old days."

Nanna's listeners were intrigued. Jim suggested, "You could've thrown her the rope to come down on."

"She was too scared. So I had to climb up with the rope down my shirt. She clung to the tree trunk. Can you imagine it? I had to swing outwards onto the branch to get round her. I tied the rope round her waist, dropped the end to the two girls on the ground so they could lower her, and finally persuaded her to shin down the smooth trunk with the security of the rope."

The boys could picture it all. Problems, problems!

Nanna came to her climax. "So I had a go. I climbed along the branch over the pool — and would you believe it? I showed off doing a victory roll round that branch and fell in — without tying the rope where we wanted it. So I had to climb up again with my dress all soaking wet and do it properly..."

It was such a relief to her grandsons and their friends to know from her own lips that Nanna had not been perfect.

DO IT YOURSELF

THE BUSH BOY EXPLORERS, as the Lawson boys call themselves — in distinction from the Cumberlands, the original 'Bush Boys' — are, of course, drawn from real life, but as composite characters plus imagination.

Happily, boys like Jack, Jim and Joe Lawson, and also Greg and Bernie Cumberland and the others, are still found on the bushy fringes of creeping suburbia. Their resemblance to some of these characters is inevitable but accidental.

Occasionally, a reader may find that some geographical feature of the Wild Bush Mountains is like some locality he knows in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. The sameness of the Australian bush makes it inevitable, as does a certain repetition of place names.

The food and equipment lists in the Appendix are practical for the situations described in this book. The author cannot accept responsibility for their use or adaptation to other situations. Extracts from *The ABC of Camping* are published with the permission of its author.

Finally, I would like to thank the boys and girls, and their mothers and fathers, who helped in writing the Bush Boy Books. The girls were the most helpful critics, shrewd, articulate and sympathetic. Also, I thank my priestly colleagues, Fr. John Walter, for his help with the computer and the typesetting, and Fr. John O'Neill, for his poem, *Starch*, on page 7, and for advice on aesthetic considerations. Most of all, I thank the chief illustrator, Miss Elisabeth Fanning, for her skill and patience.

The Author

There was hope for them.

For her part, Nanna had a very entertaining evening. She felt that, in the circumstances, a surprise approach in treating mischief was better than the slipper.

Finally she said, "It's quarter to eight, bedtime!"

* * * *

What an evening for Ben, Ken and Steve! And after what a day! And all they had done since arriving yesterday afternoon! Talk of walking on the fast track!

Nothing would ever be the same again. Somehow, they had been promoted to a higher state of boyhood, especially by the pillow fight, even without the usual awful consequences.

So that night, they slept the sound and peaceful sleep of 'the innocent'.



"I SHOWED OFF DOING A VICTORY ROLL AND FELL IN"

Chapter 35

The Mighty Bush!

DESPITE high jinks last night, the boys woke at Dad's rousing shake with little more than a yawn.

What with early Mass at 7 a.m., well before six o'clock Nanna had an early cuppa and a piece of toast. "To keep up my blood sugars," she informed them, as the boys brought in more wood.

The Land Rover, with six boys in their best clothes, was first away at 6.05 a.m., well in advance of the others. Jack parked at the gate of the Castonelli pasture. They strode briskly along Wombat Parade, over the crossing, and arrived at Guntawang's grand business multiplex.

Mrs Castonelli greeted them warmly, then excused herself to get on with her hurry and bustle. "I musta leave tings ready for Luigi — he only a man..."

Meanwhile the boys examined the hardware in the General Store. It was so interestingly, all intermingled with the clothing and the foodstuffs. It was an eye-opener for recent arrivals from Boxwatch and Lahdidar. In such places a General Store of the Guntawang-style had not been sited or sighted in living memory.

The van left the Lawson home with the girls at 6.20 a.m. Colleen reminded Dad, "If Jack were here, he'd tell you to take a good run at the Jumpback."

Back-seat drivers did not rile Dad. He was so good natured. "Just watch me," he told Colleen, with a grin she could see in the rear-vision mirror.

At Guntawang, they swapped girls for boys, and set off in convoy to Galway Crag, with Mrs Castonelli and the girls leading the way, at 6.30 a.m. "Ladies before gentlemen," commented Jim, a sentiment pleasing to his

Mum. She was also pleased that Steve looked so distinguished and intellectual in his glasses and good clothes, sitting bolt upright in the crowded van.

The Mahoney and Cumberland boys were serving Mass, and did not need the Lawsons. Nor were the girls needed for a choir. The only hymn was a recessional, 'Mary, Immaculate, Star of the Morning'.

After Mass, Mrs Castonelli added Cecilia Mahoney to her load of girls and they hurried homeward for a long awaited breakfast.

She drove over the level crossing and along to the Land Rover, where they thanked her profusely. The Lawson van drew up alongside and there was a general redistribution of passengers.

Nearing the top of the Jumpback, Jack stalled the engine to a halt, and changed down to low-range gears. He forgot the foot brake had been repaired. Nevertheless, he teased Jim. "This is where you somersaulted the bike when Luigi sold us Buttercup and Bubs."

Jim retaliated. "Just think of your runaway on The Tumbledown! No foot brake, a weak hand brake and missed a gear change. I remember. Huh!"

Joe chortled. "Okay, Jim wins — on points."

On the brink of The Jumpback, they spotted three boys ahead, walking abreast, wheeling their bikes down it, no doubt to save the brake pads. Who were they?

Jim squealed, "Jack! It's the Shy Spy Triplets!" The familiar uniforms, especially the boater hats, and the colour scheme of the bikes — all unmistakable.

Jack was delighted. "We'll have word with them."

Not so Joe. "Run 'em down!" he shrieked.

Ben, Ken and Jack were shocked — lacking little brothers, they knew not their bloodthirsty propensities.

The bike-walkers, hearing the vehicle, changed to



"IT'S THE SHY SPY TRIPLETS!"

single file on the left side.

Jack stopped the Rover level with the leader. He smiled, and called across Joe and Jim, "Good morning."

The other bikes closed up. From his window seat, Jim called cheerily and cheekily, "Wanna a lift?" — knowing full well it was the last thing they wanted.

Their leader replied, "No, thank you very much.". Jack, Jim and Joe remembered the Cumberlands called him Shadrach. They couldn't remember his real name.

"You're on a dead end coming down here," Jim teased. He knew quite well that, eight days earlier, they'd been to the very entrance of *Terra Sancta*.

Shadrach had to think rapidly. He would not lie. He gulped. "Actually, we're on the way to your place."

Jack called across from the steering wheel. "No one's at home, so how can we help you?"

Again, he had put honest Shadrach on the spot. The Triplet bit his tongue and said, "Would you mind if we explored the far end of your place?"

With his quick wits, Jim confused Shadrach even more. "We've already explored it, so we *can* help you."

Little brother Meshach forgot that, in the presence of his elders, he must hold his tongue. He babbled, "Oh, we need to get it all exact for ourselves. It's to make a map. We've got a Global Positioning System. You couldn't help us with that."

Shadrach flushed deeply. He was too kind to rouse on his brother and just had to make the best of it.

Jim immediately went for the jugular. "Oh, we'd love to have those figures for *our* map. Perhaps you'll share 'em with us, on your way home?"

In the rear vision, Jack saw the van coming. So he told the Triplets, "Our Mum's coming. Best you ask her. Here she is." And he drove on.

Well! The boys in the Rover buzzed like bees as they parked it. In the kitchen, they mended the fire, brought the kettle to the boil and checked the water jacket around the inner pot with the porridge.

They kept a sharp lookout for the Triplets through the open door. So far, no sign of them.

Then the van arrived with the girls and, somehow, the Triplets must have slithered by the house unseen.

Thanks to the visitors' bacon, breakfast was three courses, like the boys' camp yesterday. It seemed strange, even uncomfortable, to the Lawsons to eat meat on a Friday, but this was a Solemnity.

There was only one topic of talk. What had Mum said to the Triplets? "I told them," she said, "You're welcome, and invited them to breakfast, but they excused themselves." She looked cunning. "You'd be proud of me, Jack. I suggested they might share their measurements with you."

Jack and Jim grinned. But Joe wanted blood...

Even so, all three were full of dark forebodings. Was their big timber really under threat of logging?

The visiting boys were out of their depth and could not fathom what all the fuss was about.

* * * *

After fond farewells, it was hats on, grab staffs and set out, first for Little Bogie. Two knapsacks held four meals for six boys, plus water to carry.

The sudden plunge south of *Terra Sancta* into the big timber delighted the visitors. Like a herald of old, Ben trumpeted, "Once more into the Mighty Bush!"

By contrast, Ken sank his voice to a reverential whisper. "These trees are even taller than in Paradise."

Jim disagreed. "Not really," he said. "It seems so cos they're so closely packed."

At the top of the ladder above Little Bogie, Jim bragged, "This is where I nearly took the High Dive — but Jack and Joe saved me." He bowed to his brothers.

The visitors were scared of heights but determined not to show it. They approached the ladder gingerly. Nevertheless, Ben volunteered, "Will I go first?"

Jack spared him. "Better let Jim. Watch what he does. Never hold loose rungs. Hold the sides, in case a rung shakes loose, and you somersault backwards."

With Jim below them, Jack gave the visitors advice from above, and Joe prattled on with no one listening.

At the bottom, Ken said, "We orta have a swim."

"No," said Jack. "We've given this pool to the girls so it wouldn't be fair. It's a girls' pool now."

Jim added, "Besides, it's too soon after breakfast for a morning tea swim." At this, Ben pouted.

"Can't we have a swim without morning tea?"

Joe chimed in. "Yo ho nope no. Tea an' tucker warm us after a swim — how else would we get dry?"

Jack muttered to Steve, "Arguin' with Joe's a waste of time, like swallowing a live snake with both hands tied behind you." Joe took this as a compliment, beamed at them, and offered a new version of how *he* taught his brothers to swim.

Jim neatly dodged the offer. "But Joe, we need you to lead the way *across the stepping stones*." He glared at Joe. He and Jack were remembering Joe's "no" *not* to use the stepping stones that famous Wednesday. Jim finished off tamely, "And we need you to show 'em the caves."

It pleased Joe so to do, downstairs and upstairs.

Then Jack took the lead. As before, with cousins Simon and Dominic, the Southern Bulwark was a tough trackless climb. However, all they needed was a

negotiable route. So again Jack and Jim hunted left and right to find a way up the many small cliffs.

It was off-putting for Steve. He challenged them, "You act just like you're lost."

At once, Joe backed his brothers: "Yo ho nope no, not lost!" Actually Jack and Jim were quite confident, and they toughed it out carrying the heavy knapsacks.

Toughed it? So did everyone, some more, some less, what with abrasions, torn nails, bruises and thorns.

Triumph came at the cliff top — a grand view north, east and west, across and along Koala Creek.

Joe had his own triumph. Like a conjuring trick, he unburied the earlier orange skins and apple cores, just to show 'em. They rested, with legs up on knapsacks. Jim explained 'blood to the brain' to the doubters.

They nibbled Anzac biscuits with gulps of water.

With his back to the gorge, Jack stood up to address them. "From here on, we'll be real Bush Boy Explorers, going into country never before visited by man."

Good-naturedly, Jim muttered, 'Blah!'

The new boys looked scared. Nevertheless, Ben and Steve insisted on their turn with the knapsacks.

Jack pulled out the compass. When Mr Mistry first gave it to them, Jack passed it to Jim, saying, "I've already got the knife." But in the bush, Jim insisted on Jack minding it. So amid knife, string and hanky in his pocket, Jack rummaged till he untangled the compass.

The others looked on, mildly interested.

He swung up the lid, aligned it ahead, but left the prism flat. He steadied the swinging card with the damping button. Under the lubber line, it said 200°.

"Yes, it's a bit west of south," he declared. "That orta start us on the branch ridge leading to Zodiac."

He put Ken in the lead, with Jim next, to watch for

snakes, then Steve, himself in fourth place to give mid-course directions, and after him, Ben and Joe.

Jack spoke gravely to Joe. "This is a harder rear-guard job than yesterday. You've gotta keep the party together. Make sure no one drops out. Yell to the man in the lead, 'Slow down!' or 'Stop!' if necessary. He'll do what you tell him."

With such trust placed in him, Joe even forgot his famous formula and simply said, "Yes, Jack."

Jack called to Ken. "Forward!"

It was so scrubby, so nearly flat, that the final crest of the Southern Bulwark was hard to discern. This is often so with watersheds, and so easy to lose the way.

Ken slowed, doubtful, expecting orders.

Meanwhile Joe was hoping for an excuse to call 'stop', to show his authority and test the system. But Jack might demote him if he acted on a whim...

His next best was when Ben paused to do up the tab on his boot. Joe ordered briskly, "Catch up, Ben. No breaks in the line. No getting separated."

Ben was too good natured to resent it. He held up a dirt-caked circle of metal. "Look what I've found!" He put it in his pocket and set off once more.

To both Ken and Jack, every direction north, south, east or west, was featureless, without ridge or valley, nothing to guide them. Nothing but dense wiry scrub, long grass and vines intertwining with low trees. There were little humps and hollows, with stones and rocks everywhere. Nature had proofed it to withstand both high winds and puny explorers.

If anything, the ground sloped southerly, the direction they wanted. But only at the start was there a reassuring glimpse of cone of Mount Zodiac.

Again, Jack must check the compass. Yet even a

quick glance at something hand-held might make him trip on uneven ground or get him jabbed or entangled.

So he pulled up abruptly to study the compass.

Ken, Jim and Steve disappeared into the scrub ahead. Ben and Joe closed up on Jack.

Joe spluttered with indignation. "Jack! You've broken the line! You're not allowed to stop unless I say so!" Belatedly, he bellowed, "Stop!" to Ken.

Fortunately, Steve, Jim and Ken reappeared.

Peace was restored. Jack read the compass. "Yes, a bit west of south. It's the right course to put us onto the branch ridge that leads to Zodiac." He pointed ahead, and waved to Ken to step it out once more.

The ground began to slope down. Trees grew taller and blocked any distant view. Jim was optimistic. "I think it's only a bit of a saddle."

Ben and Ken spoke together. "What's a saddle?"

Jim explained, "It's where the ridge dips and rises again and keeps going. It's not like going off its side into the creek at the bottom."

But Jack was not happy. "I *think* we're fairly close to where our ridge takes off from The Southern Bulwark. But this is not a saddle, it's a gully, and we've got to cut across it to pick up the ridge."

Ken had been doing well in front, setting the pace, dodging around or through obstacles like rocks, trees and scrub, or scrambling down the easier rocky ledges.

Jim was close behind him, ever vigilant for snakes, though the boys could not keep too close-up, lest a bent branch whip back on the next in line.

Without even realizing it, Ken, Jim and Steve were making a track. It made it easier for Jack to look about and concentrate on the distant navigation.

And this he did. But alas! what he saw did not

match up with his own rough mental map. And he began to doubt himself. Was he leading them astray? It was not a pleasant possibility.

All this time, the ground in front continued to slope gently downwards. It *did* seem to be the head of a gully. If they had really been in a saddle, they seemed to have swung off to one side. It is so easy to do.

Jack doubted if they were holding to SSW. It is so easy to curve off a direction without realizing it — until too late.

The tough going was a man-sized challenge. Watch your eyes! Watch your feet! Mind your arms and legs!

Actually, Jack wished it were rough enough to be less scrubby. "In rugged country," he muttered to himself, "it'd be steeper, but easier to know where you are and decide where to go."

Either way, whether the terrain were easy or rugged, their mother's first fears of losing themselves began to loom large in his consciousness.

PRISMATIC COMPASS

opened flat for quick work,
sighting roughly, without
using the prism

