

Chapter 36

Only Slightly Slewed

LIKE A BULLDOZER, Ken rammed his small but solid person into the jungly undergrowth. Well might Jack be pleased with Ken as scrub-basher and trail-blazer. Yet as Ken led them down another rock scramble, Jack muttered querulously to himself, "But are we really holding to SSW?"

They came upon a craggy stand-alone rock, what the Cumberlands would have described as an outlier.¹

Jim was laconic. "Looks just like our Land Rover."

Steve combined argument with humour. "No, it's a genuine fossilized Land Rover — from Noah's Ark."

They passed it to the right and pressed onward. Soon after the ground started to rise.

This gave Jack's morale a boost. "Good! We were going through a saddle after all."

However, from what he could see of it, this saddle was not quite the right shape. He excused it to himself. "Of course, the trees block the overall view." Aloud, he said, "Now we're heading up and out of it."

There were more ledges, but they were all going up, which seemed to confirm it was a saddle.

"Upward, ever upward," chortled Jim.

After another ten minutes things changed again. There were more of the little rock ledges, but they were scramble-downs, not ups. What on earth was going on?

Jack groaned. "It must be another saddle in the ridge." Then, doubtfully, "Maybe a saw-tooth ridge?"

By now, Ken was looking the worse for wear. They all were, but Ken more so, a fine specimen for practising

¹ Such outliers are left-overs from the erosion of the sandstone bedrock.

First Aid — a face all red from exertion, with bruises, scrapes and scratches on arms, legs, backs of his hands, all inflicted by raspy bushes and sharp sticks on the ends of dead branches.

Once more Jack got Joe to call a halt. "I'll take your knapsack, Ben, and go in front. Jim, come next after me, and take Steve's knapsack. Then in order, Steve, Ben, Ken, with Joe still as rear-guard."

They plodded downward. Then from halfway down the line came a cry of dismay. It was Ben. "Jack! We're back at the rock shaped like a Land Rover!" Sure enough, they were. That rock was unmistakable.

Jim tried to help, passing it off as a joke. "Jack, did you *really* plan to come past twice?"

Jack could have wept. But all he said was, "Sit on its bonnet — pretending your holding it down — and I'll check the compass again."

He moved away a little, while keeping up a running commentary to sustain morale. "This rock might have a mineral called magnetite or something which affects the compass, so I've gotta get at a distance."

Then he groaned. "It says 20°. That's a bit east of north." Then with sarcasm, "It's only 180° from where we're trying to go." And with unusual sarcasm, "We'd better walk backwards for a bit!"

For Ben, Ken and Steve, angles, degrees and, indeed numbers of any sort, were as unreal as 'the square root of minus one'. Like sums at school, getting them wrong had no practical consequence for real life.

Helpful Jim interpreted. "Jack means we're going in exactly the opposite direction to what we should." But to cheer him up. "It's not your fault, Jack. We're muffed without the map we haven't made yet."

"You mean, we're lost!" wailed Ken.

Consternation! Mayhem! And the onset of panic — too well Jack knew the symptoms. He rose to the occasion. “Oh, this is nothing, yo ho nope no.” Such a tribute to Joe-speak would help. He continued, “Two weeks ago when we were *really* lost” — he glanced at Jim and smiled reassuringly — “we only curved round 180° — so this is not as bad, a mere 540°.”

Jim too waxed optimistic. “We’re not lost, fellows, we’re only slightly slewed.” He refrained from the bush humour that completes it, “Maybe for a couple of days.”

Joe chuckled. “Yo ho yep yes, just a bit slewed!”

The optimism of the Lawsons, whether it was real or feigned, cheered the visitors.

Jack looked at the sun. “I forgot. I should’ve been checking the direction from the sun. But I didn’t. Look at it now. It’s about an hour or two before north.” He did not bother to explain sun-time and its link with north. Such navigator-talk was beyond the visitors, and explanations might sound like convincing himself.

Abruptly, he turned about to face south-south-west. He pointed, “That’s where we should be going. But we’re hemmed. See, above the trees. Cliffs!”

Steve squawked. “How’ll we ever get home?”

Jim was soothing. “Easy! For today, we forget Mount Zodiac and explore here instead.” He spoke like a tycoon trading his way out of a deficit. After all, Columbus had set out for the East Indies and discovered America.

Jack, too, was consoling. “Yes, Jim means, simply go downhill in this valley. It’ll empty into Koala Creek. Then turn left, and easy going to Paradise.”

“Glug! Clunk!” cried Joe. “I forgot. We’re not going home to *Terra Sancta* but only to Paradise.”

Jack turn stoic again. “Well, it *is* an adventure.”

Jim could not resist. "Adventure's what we want."

Ben, Ken and Steve were worried. Ken said, "It's all my fault. I'm to blame. I led you the wrong way."

Jim dished out an overdose of his own brand of 'blah'. "No, Ken, it's your spinal column. It's got a slight curvature which leans you to the left. So *you* go round in anticlockwise circles."

Jack dismissed Ken's spinal column. "Rot! You're not to blame, Ken. It was me! The wrong way? Don't you see, I've let you turn through one and a half full circles instead of going straight. I'm a big goat!"

Joe was irrepressible. "Calling names, Jack? Tch tch! Yo ho yep yes, yer the goat, but I won't dob yer."

The banter lightened their fears.

Jim made helpful suggestions. "How about a gob of water and an Anzac biscuit, Jack?" Jack nodded.

Joe put on his woeful look. "I won't dob on yer for saying 'gob', Jim, but it's on Mum's blacklist."

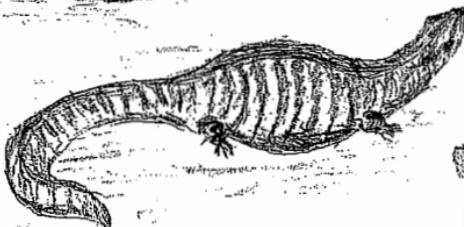
The snack raised their spirits further.

Again Jack changed their marching order. "Ben, take over the lead. Do what Jim said: go downhill wherever you can, and it'll all pan out okey-dokey."

As the valley steepened, the vegetation became more agreeable, though not as lush or as pleasing as Paradise. At least it was easier to see ahead, easier to see underfoot. And there were unexpected pleasant distractions — unexpected for that time of day...

First, Ben glimpsed a wombat. Then Jim pointed to half a dozen kangaroos. Steve saw a blue-tongued lizard. Jack spotted a goanna, but made sure Joe claimed it first. Ken saw wallabies.

Joe also saw a black snake and wished the goanna would do its swallowing trick for the visitors.



EF/

SOME AUSTRALIAN ANIMALS

There were birds galore, birds with names and birds without, butterflies, bees, bull ants, leeches.

Joe acclaimed it in awe, "It's like a zoo!"

"Well, it's the animals that got loose from that Noah's Ark Land Rover up the hill," quipped Steve.

Then Ben got a leech. Jim gave him the salt treatment. "No roses without thorns," chortled Joe.

Jack pointed at the sun. "Its height says it'll soon be time for an early lunch, so let's 'ave it extra early."

"Where's the water?" asked Jim. Lunch was quite unthinkable without a billy of tea.

"Yeah, Jack, where's the water?" pestered Joe.

"Seek and ye shall find," urged Jack.

They did. Ah, crossing and recrossing the mossy stones they had missed seeing a trickle between them.

Finding a lunch spot was easy — cropped grass free of leeches and bull ants — but there was a lack of their favourite flat stone slabs for a fireplace.

They gathered a lot of rounded mossy stones. Jack was cautious. "These might be damp inside. Damp turns to steam. Steam explodes stones like a bomb."

So Jim built a spacious fireplace, like an outer pallisade round a fort, with the fire out of reach.

Joe put it delicately. "This fire can't lick those stones — it's not got a long tongue like *my* goanna."

The billy soon came to the boil. The food ration was three half-rolls each, eaten off 'a table' of clean grass, spread with cheese or jam and dates with butter.

They munched contentedly like cows or kangaroos while Jim gave the visitors a graphic account of the Lawsons getting lost. "It was Monday before last," he told them, "on our very first exploration."

"Yeah," Joe threw in. "Jack got us lost."

This was too much for Jack. "Oh yeah? Who got

in a tizzy? Who ran off like a headless chook? Who ran off and had to be dragged out of a bog?"

He didn't say who, and *they* did not own up, but the visitors guessed.

Ben brought Jim back to his story. "I say, Jim. How did you find out where you were?"

Jim paid tribute to Jack. "Jack climbed a tree, then Joe and me. And we got a glimpse of the Roof-Room on *Terra Sancta* and a flag the girls had put up."

Ken's curiosity prompted him to ask Jack. "Which way did *you* curve round?"

"It was a 180° turn to the left," admitted Jack.

"Ho!" cried Steve. "So you've got that curvature of the spine, same as Jim said about Ken?"

"Just you wait till we get to Koala Creek," retorted Jack, "and you'll see who gets ducked. Fancy having a fire without a handy pool alongside..."

Ben became chirpy. "And so say all of us."

After a second mug of tea, Jack reminded them of resting in the shade and writing up their log books.

For Ben, log books were agony like homework. To delay it, he asked, "What's this nick-nack I found?" He glanced at it and tossed it over to Jack.

With a stick Jack scraped out the dirt and studied a squat open cylinder as big as three fifty cent coins stacked up. "See the faint marks and the spike in the middle? What ever it is, it's deady-bones."

Joe reached out. "May I have it for our museum, please?" Ben nodded, and Jack gave it to Joe.

Jim added, "See the little ring for a cord? It must have been worn round the neck and the cord broke in the scrub." After that, he settled down, his back against a big gum tree, with his legs sprawled. It was a tree built just right for leaning on, and well over half

a metre through.

The others saw how comfy it was. They packed themselves in, just fitting neatly all around it.

Jim stopped scribbling in his log book to protest, "Ben, you're jogging my elbow, and Joe, you're leaning on my shoulder and breathing on me neck."

Ben and Joe ignored him, though they soon suffered the same fate from the others.

Jack wrote on, **WHERE IS THE WATERSHED?** and put in a sketch map, to be completed later at home.

Jim wrote, **HOW WE GOT SLIGHTLY SLEWED**, comparing the two experiences of getting lost, and how they learnt the hard way due to Dad's discovery method.

Joe saw things solely in terms of a rear-guard: **HOW I KEPT THE PARTY TOGETHER**. He omitted any other events of the day. Authors write for themselves...

Ben was intrigued by the wildlife and called his entry, **WHAT WE SAW IN NATURE'S ZOO**.

HOW WE FOUND WHICH WAY TO GO, was Ken's considered effort. In mastering his panic, he had learnt a good deal of bush lore.

HOW WE GOT LOST, by Steve, bluntly shared out the blame. To his credit, he beat his own breast for being like 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary' in the nursery rhyme, and having made Jack's job more difficult.

The weary boys began to doze. Jim, who had got in first, was in the full shade of the trunk. Alongside him, Ben and Joe shared this shade in part, and the others the dappled shade of eucalypt leaves.

With hats over eyes and spines slumped somewhere between neck and belt, they dozed for twenty minutes.

Joe's eyes blinked open under his hat, to gaze sleepily up the long trunks of the nearby trees. These had peculiar scratch marks. This peering up tree trunks had

become almost automatic with the Lawson boys. They forgot it was the influence of Shy Spy Triplets.

A few of the eucalypts were a rough barked species, but most were smooth, the ones called gum trees. Their cousins, the angophoras, were represented as well, with contorted limbs branching off in unexpected directions. They, too, are called gum trees, though they lack eucalyptus oil in their leaves.

Such were the thoughts running hazily and lazily through Joe's mind and memory. He blinked into half-wakefulness. Dreamily he half-noted a brown bundle up the trunk of the next tree about five metres away. He was mildly curious. However, at that very moment, a far more pressing matter demanded his attention...

Almost within touching distance, The SHY SPY TRIPLETS were inspecting the six resting boys! They stopped to gazed down on Joe.

Joe gaped up at them in round-eyed wonderment.

READING A MAP

A map is like a photo taken from an aeroplane. In fact, that is how maps are usually made nowadays. A map pretends that the earth is flat — which is quite accurate enough for small distances like 500 km or so.

Vital information to look for on a map:

1. the **name** of the map;
2. the direction of **north**;
3. the **scale** of map shows what distances on the map represent as real distances on the earth;
4. the **legend** with the code for creeks, tracks, roads, railways etc.;
5. the **shape of the land** shown by contour lines, hatching, etc. which should also be listed in the legend.



JOE GAPPED IN ROUND-EYED WONDERMENT

Chapter 37

Shy Spies on the Loose

THAT morning was the very first time that the Shy Spy Triplets had actually spoken *with* the Lawsons. Of course, on-and-off for two whole weeks, they had done much talking *about* each other.

Also that very morning, Meshach had embarrassed big brother Shadrach by speaking out of turn. He had blabbed that they intended to use a Global Positioning System known as GPS on the *Terra Sancta* property.

Mrs Lawson's arrival in the van had saved Meshach from rebuke. And she approved Shadrach's request. "Go ahead, boys, you're more than welcome. Check anything you like. But do call in and share your findings with the *Terra Sancta* boys."

This put the Triplets in debt to the Lawsons. They were already embarrassed at their debt to the Cumberlands... Not surprisingly, Shadrach politely declined the invitation to breakfast and the van drove on.

The Triplets arrived at the *Terra Sancta* gate a minute after the van. They glided swiftly past the homestead unobserved, glad that the soothing purr of their electric motors was scarcely audible. Everyone had gone inside. But somehow the SST felt guilty...

Shadrach's sense of direction held good. He headed east and soon found the continuance of Swampy Ridge Road. There was a pause while Meshach dropped the sliprails. Here Abednego held both bikes and jotted down Shadrach's first GPS readings.

They wheeled the bikes through, put up the rails, and rode along the old timber track in the Lawson's firewood territory.

On their last visit to The Tumbledown, Shadrach had dropped his handkerchief with the tell-tale initials D.D., for Dudley Dollerman, sewn in one corner. Before that, they had only skirted The Tumbledown through the bush. They had not heard of Jack's hair-raising plunge in the Land Rover and salvation by fruit vines.

At both top and bottom of The Tumbledown, Abednego wrote down Shadrach's GPS readings. Then they guzzled passion fruit.

With full power from electric motors, they still huffed and puffed walking their bikes back up its impossible grade. Motoring back towards the fenced part of *Terra Sancta* was easy. However, they turned down the side track where the Lawsons had first surprised them, when they had had a rope around the biggest tree. Here they took their fourth set of GPS measurements.

What now? How to get down the cliff to Goliath, the Big Tree the Lawsons called Grandfather Gum? Shadrach declared, "It'd take us too long to find a way — though I'm sure the Lawsons've got one. Our best bet is down the ladder and along to our own camp at Shady Refuge. We'll leave our bikes outside the Lawsons' front gate, where we did before."

"Will we call in on them?" asked Abednego.

His cousin was torn two ways. "We've really got to, to be polite, but I don't know what Father will say."

However, he was able to postpone his embarrassment. At the sliprails, they caught a glimpse of Jack and his five mates disappearing into the bush immediately south of the house. A curve in the ground level hindered a fuller view.

"Only two knapsacks," observed Abednego. "That means it's a day trip."

Shadrach thought fast. "They're probably going

back to their camp via the ladder to Koala Creek.. Maybe it *is* their only way... And we can't go in while they're there." He paused a moment and made up his mind. "We'll have to follow them to make sure."

Meshach grinned mischievously. "You mean, we've really going to *spy on 'em?*" The jibe made him feel better after his morning's contretemps.

Abednego chuckled. Shadrach looked abashed. "Well, sort of," he admitted. "And we've got to hurry or we'll lose track of them. We simply must know where they are, before we pop in to Paradise."

They left their electric bikes outside the sliprails, leaning on the post-and-rail fence. Shadrach led them inside the fence line to avoid being seen from the house. Nevertheless, skirting the jungly bush near the dam, they were in full view on the open ground below the chook yard and the dairy. They tried to hurry, yet without attracting attention by hurrying... However, no one seemed to be looking, no one challenged them.

They scrambled over the southern splintery fence. Once in the dense timber, they pelted down the track up which they had limped eight days before.

Now a double caution was required — not to catch up with the Lawsons, yet not to lose them.

They arrived at the top of the ladder only just in time to see the six boys leaving the east end of the Upper Cave and heading up the steep ridge side.

Abednego voiced their new quandary. "They can't be going to Paradise, at least, not straight away."

Shadrach made up his mind. "We'll just have to... *spy.*" To console himself it was not an unworthy sort of spying, he added, "In case they double back."

His brother and cousin eyed him thoughtfully and grinned. A little abashed, he added, "Well, we've got

to know where they are or they might catch us near their tent and *think* we were spying when we weren't."

Their first difficulty was to find a way into the Upper Cave. Aha! Here was a scrub-scramble at the west end of the lower cave. They would have liked to examine both caves, but they must press on.

Shadrach felt he was disobeying Father's orders. He told himself that unforeseen circumstances changed things, and that Father was always so reasonable. He asked himself, "What would Father *want*?"

Their next difficulty was climbing the Southern Bulwark. Jack's group were so agile they did not roll a single stone. Soon they were out of sight.

Finally, the Triplets arrived at the top of the main climb. They collapsed on the rocky edge and needed a drink. But Shadrach, despite perspiration, puff and protests, insisted on saving the little water they carried.

Abednego led their thoughts elsewhere. "You should always look back to see where you've come from, to make sure you can find your way back." Well, they were already facing that glorious and rugged view.

With his customary bluntness, Meshach summed up their new problem. "Well, what next?"

His brother's answered obliquely. "Where on earth have they got to?" But how could the others guess any better than himself?

So he reasoned like this. "We've never been here before. And it's worth *exploring* any way." He had let slip a Lawson word, so he hastened on. "We might see some of those tall trees with scratch marks that Father mentioned..." Saying that made him feel better. He continued, "As long as we keep Koala Creek in view on our left, we should be able to find a way down to The Thunderfall — and to creep into Paradise if we get

there before them, if that's where they're going. From up here on top, we ought to get a glimpse of them. He turned round and pointed up the gentle rise behind them. "They couldn't possibly have gone up there. That scrub looks awful."

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ALAS for Shadrach! That was exactly what the Lawsons had done, exactly as they planned. Their pursuers had missed seeing them by seconds, for they had only just disappeared into that awful scrub.

The Shy Spy Triplets set off along the top of the Southern Bulwark. Well, not quite. To be precise, they kept the actual ridge top in sight on their right. This way, they could keep a close eye the other way, into the gorge of Koala Creek.

The rim of the gorge was cut here and there with erosion crevices. In avoiding these, Shadrach led his party onto the slightly higher ground of the watershed.

"We must be careful not to catch up with them," Abednego warned, "or they'll be sure to think we are spying on them, no matter what we say, even though we're not really..." Hmmp!

Although it was far too early for lunch, Meshach begged for food. "I'm star-star-starving Just think of all the fuel we've used up climbing those cliffs." Then the usual threat. "If I die of hunger, it'll be all your fault and I might kick you carrying me to hospital."

Abednego did not agree with the dying or the carrying, but he did want lunch. "If, as we expect, the Lawsons cut off into the gorge, we'll spot them better from further off than by treading on their heels. So let's have lunch now. And if we don't see them below us, we'll know it's safe for us to go down."

His pleading was persuasive. Nevertheless,

Shadrach played for time. "Let's go along a bit further, at least until we can see The Thunderfall. They can't possibly have got there yet — there's not enough time — and while we're eating lunch we'll be in a good position to see how they get down his side of the gorge."

So, with Meshach leading, they dodged around the army of obstacles on the top of the trackless ridge. Very soon, Abednego pointed to their Shady Refuge — the Lawsons' Secret Water — with the triumphant declaration, "There's our tent. Doesn't the orange colour show? So we'd better have lunch."

"Stop fudging," chided Shadrach "I said when we could see The Thunderfall."

He did not have to stave off a mutiny for very long. A bit further, and they could hear it thundering, though they could not see the falling water, just a glimpse of the pool below it at the lower level.

Abednego declared, "This is a good spot for spying." He corrected himself. "I mean, it's a good spot for seeing them getting down the side of the gorge and disappearing into their Paradise."

Actually, he meant a good spot for lunch, and that was how Meshach took it. "Same thing," he muttered.

The Shy Spy Triplets shared the water bottle in the usual unhygienic fashion. They gobbled Mrs Dollerman's sandwiches — egg with a pinch of salt; ham and cheese with tomato and lettuce; and strawberry jam. After this came slices of plain cake, oranges and apples. Their healthy appetites did justice to it all.

With increasing impatience, they waited for some sign of the Lawsons and their friends. Shadrach was adamant. "No one could possibly sneak into Paradise without us seeing them," he insisted. "Let's go a bit further till we're right above the falls and see if they've

left any footprints up here.”

Meshach was again in front. He prattled away over his shoulder, and kept tripping on sticks and stones. It made it harder not to get slewed. Shadrach would have realized it, if he had not been keeping both eyes busy. His left eye was on Koala Gorge, and his right looking for scratch marks on the smooth barked trees.

They were now walking on the very top of the ridge. They tended to lose the view of Koala Gorge, perched as they were on the upper slopes of a valley on their right, the south side of the Southern Bulwark. Here, walking was quite pleasant, and not at all like the unfriendly scrub with which Jack's party had battled.

And yes, there were claw marks on the trees. This would excuse them with Father for heading off the set course... even better, if they could find the goannas that made the footprints up the trees. Maybe Father was aiming to market a new sort of goanna-oil liniment?

Only then did it dawn on Shadrach to ask, “Where's Koala Creek?”

Meshach and Abednego halted and took a sweeping look around. Yes, things were not as they should be. However, it did not worry them.

The Triplets didn't bother with a compass — Mr Dollerman reckoned its absence saved argument — so they usually got direction by quick glances at the sun. There was no doubt about it — they were heading south.

To pick the easiest walking, Meshach was leading them gently downhill. The eucalypts were grouped in clumps and easily dodged. There was springy grass underfoot, and fairly close-cropped by the wild animals.

The trees grew nobler, taller, more interesting, and scratch marks helped further to distract the navigation.

Shadrach summed up aloud. “Those Lawsons must

be somewhere down here. If they'd been going where we expected, we couldn't possibly have missed them. So we'll have a good hunt and make sure."

Abednego — whose real name was David Marsden, and who hailed from 'up the country' — was a better 'bushy' than his cousins. He stopped suddenly and sniffed. "Can't you smell smoke? It's faint, but it's from burning sticks, not burning leaves... smoke from a cooking fire."

Shadrach and Meshach sniffed dutifully. Shadrach couldn't smell it but Meshach *thought* he could...

They went on further and then, before they knew it, there was the Lawson group, lolling against a tree.

At once, Shadrach, beckoned furiously, and called from the end of the line in a hissing whisper, "Come back!" After all, they had done what they set out to do, which was to find the Lawsons. They should hasten back to Paradise at once and use the GPS to plot the co-ordinates of Goliath, the grand tree.

But Meshach was in front. He just kept going.

Willy-nilly, Abednego followed, so Shadrach had to as well. They circled the tree and pulled up in front of Jack.

As usual, Joe had placed himself between his brothers, for security. His eyes blinked open to see the sky, the trees and a brown blob up a tree. Then they focused on the SST. He shook Jack vigorously — enough to dislocate any arm less muscular than those exercised on woodheap work or its equivalent.

"Jack, Jack!". His brother's name was not ideal for sibilance, but Joe managed it. His hissing whisper had the fierceness of a steam siren, calculated to awake any creature not completely deaf or dead.

Jack flung out an arm in surprise or self-defence.

It collided violently with Joe's nose.

Jack groaned drowsily, "What's up?" as he surfaced slowly from the depths.

Joe jumped up. He forgave Jack and hissed, "Look!" and he pointed a quivering finger at the Shy Spy Triplets. His bristling suspicions of them had in no way lessened. But he must treat his enemies kindly.

He spoke flatly and without enthusiasm. "Hello." Then, as a distracting topic of irrelevance, he added, "Did your GPS go okay? Yo ho yep yes?" He was sure that would embarrass them.

"Ah," thought Shadrach, "he does know what it is."

Jack now jumped to his feet and spoke warmly. "Hello." Bush hospitality demanded more. "Like a cuppa?"

Shadrach spoke for the others. "Thank you very much, but no. We really can't stop. We're exploring."

He soothed his conscience: it was really true. Their exploring was to find scratches on trees and also find where the Lawsons were, but not to fraternize with them. He must get back to Paradise before they did, and make the precious GPS measurements.

For a different reason, Joe supported Shadrach. He would speed them on their way. "And good riddance," he muttered to himself. He fished in his pocket and pulled out the hat badge which he had found in Elijah's Cave at the top end of Paradise.

He handed it to Shadrach. "Looks like your colour scheme," he prompted enticingly. "Yo ho yep yes?"

Jack grinned. Fancy Joe! As cunning as Jim...

Meshach spoke hurriedly. "Thank you. It fell off my hat somewhere and I thought I'd never see it again."

Shadrach and Abednego added their thanks. "It'll save him paying for another one," said Abednego.

Shadrach was puzzled. "Where did you find it?"

Jack re-entered the conversation. He smiled. "It was in the cave we call Elijah's — it's in our Paradise Valley." But to himself, he was saying, "So now we know that you know that we know that you've been there, and poking about near our camp."

"Ah yes," said Shadrach agreeably. "We called in Saul's Cave." Jim grinned to himself. 'Saul's Cave' was his own suggestion, but Joe had insisted on Elijah's.

Meanwhile Meshach was pinning the badge on his hat. He volunteered some details. "In that case, it must have fell off when I was fanning the fire."

Shadrach rebuked him. "You jolly well know you shouldn't fan fires with your college hat."

He got a small brother's perfunctory, 'Sorry.'

Jim, unlike brother Joe, bore the Triplets no ill-will. He told them, "You orta get army hats like ours. They're good for fanning fires, carrying water and charging head down through the scrub."

Recognition flittered over Shadrach's face.

Jim noted it. So Shadrach knew the phrases. Of course he would. Greg himself had seen the pages of the *The ABC of Camping*, poking out of Shadrach's knapsack at The Secret Water during the heat wave.

It didn't matter. Joe had done the trick. Though Meshach and Abednego would have liked to yarn over a billy of tea — as also would Jack and Jim — Joe had spurred Shadrach into action.

With a brief word of thanks, the Shy Spy Triplets disappeared northeast, uphill, into the trees.

Chapter 38

Lost World

JIM WANTED to do something. He suggested, "Let's get going. Let's explore this valley a bit — and see what we can *discover*." Dad's code word prompted him to wink at Jack.

"Okay, your turn in front, Steve," said their gallant leader. "Just keep heading down the valley. And a prize for whoever finds something first."

"What's the prize?" demanded Joe.

Jack came down on him. "*You'll* never know."

Joe, unbowed by rebuke, stuck out his tongue. Then, with brashness, aplomb and his very best strine, "You already owe me a superdoop prize cos I wuz first to see the Triplets." Jack gave up and shook his head.

The valley was now easy walking, so Steve was in the best position to see things first. He yelled, "Look! An old house!" He slowed to a halt, shy at the prospect of strangers. "I wonder if anyone's at home..."

They bunched up in front of an old hut.

Jim gave it a sweeping glance and declared knowledgeably, "Made of split slabs." He went on to explain 'slabs' to the visitors, lest they though 'slabs' were big bits of chocolate. "Slabs are flat planks split off long logs. All the books say trimming them smooth with an adze was highly skilled work. The rafters would have been saplings and the roof, big sheets of stringybark."

The hut was broken down and caved in. What might have been a floor had collapsed and rotted.

Gaping holes between the slabs gave a clear view of the inside.

Ken was curious. "Who made it? And what for?"

"We'll ask that woman in Galway Craggs," declared Jim. "She's an... an archeologist."

"Genealogist," corrected Jack. "She's Miss Tanglewebb and she digs up stuff out of old books an' newspapers and peoples' diaries an' letters an' things."

They stood around in the knee-deep luscious grass. Ken got bitten by a bull ant. Steve got a leach. The bull ant was easily brushed off with a stick but the pain kept increasing. The leach was the opposite. It refused to be brushed off. The leach's weaponry was not a sting but its slimy feel. Steve felt sick...

Jim took a sweeping glance at the beauty all about. "No roses without thorns." The consolations of philosophy are much easier to dole out to others.

Jack, however, was already burrowing in the side pocket of his knapsack. "It's a new antidote I call a double-bunger. I've only just mixed it. It's a powder. You put it on bull ants with spit."

They knew he meant the bites and not the ants.

He unscrewed the lid of a small pill bottle. Ken licked his finger and stuck it in. It came out white and he rubbed it in. "Ooooh, that feels better. Thanks."

"Add more spit," advised Jack. "Spit's water and makes bi-carb soda into an alkali. It *antidotes an ant*." He paused for them to admire the alliterated syllables before adding, "And bees, too, but not wasps."

Then he turned to Steve. "No need to lick. Take a pinch of powder and sprinkle it on the leech. Then he'll flick off." Steve did, the leech did, and Steve said, "Thanks."

Jim's lecturing style on bush baths had influenced Jack. Indeed, both seemed to be unconsciously imitating Dad. Jack continued, "For the leech, it's the salt that does the trick" — he brandished the canister

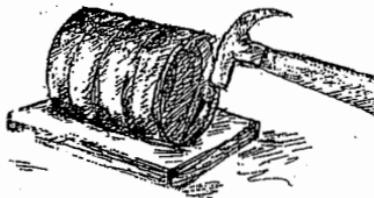
Home-Made Billy Cans

- Use prune or fruit tins (2 or 3 litre size) with crimped and soldered seams. Tomato sauce tins are *okay* but hard to clean; powdered milk tins are useless because without crimping the solder melts in hot fires.



Scout knife cuts smoothly with no jagged edge
OR hammer the jags smooth.

- With hammer & nail punch holes for the handle close to the rim and opposite each other.

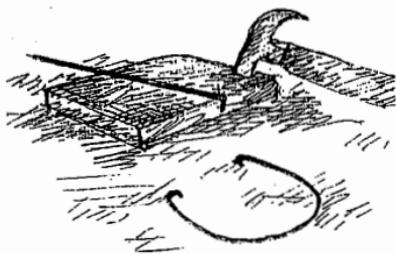


- Use the thickest coat hanger wire available. Wrap it snugly round the rim and leave 3cm for bending through the holes. Handles too long or too short are no good.



1 to 1½ cm extra at each end in addition to reaching from hole to hole.

- Cut the wire with pliers or a cold chisel. Bend with pliers, or hammer it over an edge. When fitted, bend the ends up, to keep in place. The finished handle should lie down around the rim with a little slack.



as he screwed on the lid. "Leeches go to bits with salt. Oh, and bi-carb soda with lick is soothing on burns."

He put the precious mixture back in the knapsack. The others caught a glimpse of the label: BITES, BURNS, LEECHES.

Ben grinned at Ken and Steve. Life with the Lawsons! They'd have lots to talk about at home, lots to boast about at school. He'd make a brag list, so not the slightest morsel would be left unshared.

Once more, amid a buzz of talk, Steve led off.

Jim told Jack. "When we had the chance, we should have asked the Shy Spy Triplets'll for those GPS readings — in case they don't call in at *Terra Sancta* going home."

Jack was confident. "They sort of owe it to us an' they're honourable, so I reckon they will."

Fifty metres beyond the ruin, Joe spotted something even before Steve did. "It's a cow yard, just like mine at home." He looked appealingly at Jack. "Do I get a second prize to Steve as well as my super prize?"

Jim ignored Joe and answered for Jack. He drawled, "Well, it may 've bin a cow yard a century or so ago, but even Joe's cow could jump out of it now."

This could scarcely be gainsaid.

They moved on. Soon Steve shouted his latest find. "It's a big river! Our trickle flows into it. What'll we call it?" He did not think to claim an extra prize.

One glance was enough. Jack turned to Jim. "It's not a river. It's good old Koala Creek."

The deputy navigator agreed. His own question was, "What are we going to call our valley? Steve thought of Noah's Ark so we could call the whole show Noah's Zoo."

"How about Animal Farm?" suggested Ken "It's the name of a book, so it's cultured," — and, preening

himself — “we are cultured.”

Jack remembered something. “Actually, it’s called Goanna Rill on Greg Cumberland’s map.”

Ben’s reading came to the fore. “How about Lost World? I’d like to tell everyone at school I’ve been to Lost World — it’s romantic.”

The others agreed. Lost World *was* romantic.

They plodded on upstream in Koala Creek, stepping it out cheerfully, bravely yet wearily. They *were* tired. But the triumphs made all the difference. They were iron-boys! From Ducky onwards, they were on familiar ground once more. They passed the BOY-GIRL notice at the T-junction to *The Hills of Home*, passed The Big Bogie Pool, and onward to The Thunderfall, whose sight and sound was so welcome.

* * * *

Jack’s team were glad to *get home* to their camp. Here they quietly set to work, without any hectic rushing. They unpacked the extra food from their early start that morning, an eternity ago, at *Terra Sancta*. They started the cooking, had a bush bath and a soothing swim, and ate a very filling meal — with fried bacon and sliced onion; potatoes, boiled first then crisped in fat; plus boiled greens and corn; followed up by prunes and sweetened rice, and mugs of tea.

They washed up fast ‘to get it over’, and lounged back round the fire, sipping more tea, rubbing in Citronella, and enjoying the bush privilege of yarning.

Joe told them about another school dog called Spot. “He lived next door to the school, an’ was the only dog allowed in the yard, and we all liked him an’ he liked us. But when it was school holidays, he moped at home and howled. The mother of the boy who owned him called it a nervous breakdown and gave ’im half an

aspro to soothe him ... and it did.”

Jack looked round the visitors. “Your turn.”

There were mutterings, but no starters.

Jim tried to shame them. “What d’yer waste yer time at school for if yer can’t *do* anything with it — like telling a story or saying a pome or tellin’ a joke?”

Ben lamented, “Well, I’m no good at stories.”

Ken lament was briefer, just two double-syllable words. “Dunno potry.”

Steve groaned. “And no one laughs at my jokes.”

Jim came on heavy. “Yer’ll be chucked in the creek before breakfast if you don’t *do* somethin’ quick!”

Steve grimaced. “Okey-dokey. Another doggy story. When my Dad was at school he had a teacher who told ’em that when she was a little girl, her brother had a ferocious woman teacher who used to bring her dog into the classroom. If she had to leave them for a minute, she left the dog in charge, squatting by her desk. He watched ’em watching ’im. He snapped at anyone who tried patting ’im to make friends. He wouldn’t eat a sandwich. And if anyone mucked up, that dog remembered... He was a mean nasty dog. When she came back, he trotted down to that boy’s desk, and pointed his nose at the muck-up, and he got whacked. It was in the bad old days, of course.”

Jim asked, “But what happened if two boys mucked up? Did he point to them one after the other?”

Steve hadn’t thought of that. “I suppose so — but I don’t know for sure. I’ll ask Dad.”

Ben also had a yarn. “That reminds me. I got this from a kid at school. When his father was young, his family were all in a minibus taking a birthday cake to a friend’s place. On the way, they couldn’t wait. He and his brothers and sisters hollowed it out from under-

neath, and left a shell of thick icing. When they gave it to the birthday girls, her knife plunged into emptiness that crumpled into a heap of icing. She cried and there was a terrific row and all the cake thieves got spanked."

Ken tried to dodge a story. "What's on tomorrow?"

Jack said, "It all depends on the weather. If it's cool, we'll explore ridges; if it's hot, we'll go downstream and stick near the water. If it feels like blistering, we'll pull out early and go home up Joe's dream road. We mustn't get nearly stonkered to death like Greg and Bernie, or Simon and Dominic..."

Then, severely to Ken: "Now tell a story. Or else!"

Ken gulped. Inspiration came. "I got this from a boy at school. He'd bin at another school and I'll tell it like I was him." He paused for them to digest his



STEVE SAID: "THE DOG POINTED AT THE MUCK-UP"

change of person “Well, four bus loads of us left from school to go to the big creek at the Wobblegong National Park. We walked 15 minutes from the buses down a rough track on a blistering day. There were beaut rocky pools even bigger than here. We all had cossies an’ everyone went in. There were a 100 boys and we only came out to eat lunch” — he glanced at Jack — “but no tea... We all had a beaut time and struggled back to the buses, sunburnt and weary. The four teachers called the rolls: Like this: ‘Blogs?’ ‘Oh, he’s on the other bus, sir.’ Well, we got home, but late that night Blogs’s parents rang the police to say he had not come home. The police got the school principal and he got the four teachers to go with them. This search party went back late at night to Wobblegong and down to the pools. They found his clothes near a rock — the others hadn’t seen them when they left — and they found his body in a metre of water, drowned dead.”

Ken gulped, as though he had been there himself, and concluded, “What made it worse was the note they found in his pocket. It was from his mother to the teacher, saying he was *not* allowed to go swimming...”

A long silence was punctuated by sniffles.

Joe was less upset. He reminded Jack. “Where’s my superprize, and my second prize — and Steve’s?”

Jack grinned. He went to his knapsack and came back with a plastic bag. “Three for Joe, two for Steve, and one each the rest.” They were Nanna’s toffees. Joe got the three smallest, Steve the next two, and the others any bigger ones. Justice must appear to be done.

Noisily sucking toffee they said their prayers and went to bed. They quite forgot to clean their teeth...

Joe soothed any night fears. “Don’t worry about night noises on a moonless night. Just think of old

Lieutenant General Baden-Powell. I've told you about 'im before." Jim groaned. Joe ignored the groan. "When he was a junior officer in the British army in Africa, he used to sleep on the bare ground in enemy country, without a blanket or a groundsheet, and with lions sniffing 'im. He wasn't worried, cos he could tell they weren't hungry."

This was too much for Steve. He challenged Joe. "How could anyone tell if a lion's hungry or not?"

Joe was glib. "If it don't eat yer, it's not hungry."

They gasped. Only Steve expressed disgust. "Fat lot of use that'd be! Waiting to see if he chewed yer..."

With the reassuring thoughts that there were no man-eaters in Australia, they surrendered to weariness and sank into deep sleep.

* * * *

THE LAWSONS might not have slept so happily if they had known the further 'doings' of the Shy Spy Triplets that Friday afternoon.

As soon as the Triplets got clear, Shadrach's fertile mind had devised a plan. "We'll race over the ridge to Koala Creek and get to their Paradise before they can possibly get there, and get our GPS readings."

He set such a cracking pace uphill that Meshach and Abednego were breathless. They could only answer in grunts. But they expected nothing less.

Ignoring the trees with scratches on the bark, they struck the broad top of the ridge about where they had left it. Recklessly, they plunged down the northern side to The Thunderfall. It was almost the route down which Jack had led Mick, Phil and Joe the Saturday before. Indeed, Shadrach pointed to broken branches, skid marks and bare patches from displaced rocks. He grinned. "Someone's been down here — and I can

guess who.”

Mesach and Abednego would have postponed the GPS in favour of a swim. But Shadrach said, “No.” He told his cousin, “David, you’ll be cockatoo. Wait just inside the entrance. If the Lawson gang arrive, race up and warn us, so we can hide.”

Abednego answered dutifully, “Okay.”

Shadrach and Meschach hurried forward to record the exact location of Goliath, the tree known to the Lawsons as ‘Grandfather Gum Tree’. Abednego was already out of sight. Up the valley they trotted, to their Saul’s Cave, which the Lawsons called Elijah’s.

The GPS readings were stored electronically, but they wrote them down as well.

They were just back to the Lawsons’ tent, and admiring the tidy campsite, when Abednego came racing towards them. As soon as he saw them he waved frantically. His meaning was all too clear. The Lawsons were coming.

Shadrach pointed at the trees to the westward. In five seconds, he and Meshach were out of sight. They worked their way southerly and very quickly Abednego met them under the cover of the trees.

“Did they see you?” whispered Shadrach anxiously.

“I don’t think so,” he hissed back. “But they’re coming on fast and yabbering. Let’s get out of here.”

With that, the Shy Spy Triplets moved off through the scrub on the verge of the western cliffs. At the cleft at the southern entrance, they peeped out furtively. The Lawsons were nowhere in sight, and the Shy Spy Triplets slithered unseen out of Paradise.

Chapter 39

Homeward Ho!

THE BOYS in Paradise slept in! This was quite out of character for the Lawsons, though scarcely surprising. Yesterday — what a day! — all that effort, all that excitement! Then at night getting their ‘second wind’ for story telling. Finally, exhaustion had won — and with bodies blanketed in sleep, brains went blank.

A hearty breakfast revived them — porridge with milk and sugar, then egg and bacon on toast, plus more toast with butter and jam, and lots of tea. They had to combine Grace after Meals with their missed Morning Prayers — for the first time ever.

After eating, they came alive and ready for anything.

“We’ll pack up, then strike the tent,” declared Jack.

Jim had to explain the jargon to the visitors. “He means take it down and pack it up.”

While they were packing knapsacks, Joe managed to wander off as far as Grandfather Gum Tree. He gave a yell of alarm and came charging back.

“Look what I’ve found! It’s those blanketty-blank Triplets!”

Jack protested, “No language, Joe, you know that.”

Joe’s grin admitted that he knew. Best leave out ‘blanketty’ and the crude words they stood for — both quite needless. He waved a small black covered book at them. “They’ve been here again, spyin’ on us,” he charged. “It was at the foot of our big tree. They’ve been at it agin, fooling round with *our* trees.”

Jim objected. “How do you know it’s theirs?”

Joe showed them the cover. “It says, ‘Good News New Testament’.

Like a sort of Devil's advocate, Jim persisted. The evidence was insufficient. "It could have been anyone an' not the SST at all."

Joe dropped indignation for his normal cheeky cheerfulness. Dramatically, he opened the book, and drawled triumphantly, "On the inside cover, it's got, 'Presented to Dennis Dollerman by his father and mother'." Like a lawyer, he let the jury draw their own conclusion, and make it their own. He said, "Oh! how I'd love to chuck 'em in the creek, yo ho yep yes!"

But Jim was not put down so easily. "How d'yer know it was dropped yesterday arvo and not the other time they were here?" Jack reached out for the book.

Joe surpassed his usual crazy logic. "See how it's curved from ridin' in a hip pocket? Well, if it'd been here longer than overnight, it'd've been flattened by the wombats taking turns to sit on it." They had to laugh.

Jack gave Joe his due of praise. "Good on yer, Joe. But let's get on with striking the tent."

This only encouraged Joe to disagree. He shammed anxiety. "We're gotta hurry to get back, to get 'em" — he nodded at Ben, Ken and Steve — "to the train. We 'aven't time to strike the tent. Let's leave it here. And the tent'll be waitin' for us next time."

But Jack was adamant. "Good try, Joe, but no."

Jim made peace by asking, "Which way will we go home, Jack?"

Joe answered for him. "There are at least three ways," he explained importantly to the Lahdidar boys. "From here in Paradise, there's Joseph's ladder (that's mine and the easiest, of course) and Jacob's Ladder (that's Jim's and it's danger-oos); and from The Thunderfall there's the short steep ridge scramble to Koala Spur where we escaped after Jim's bushfire. Then

downstream from Big Bogie there's Koala Spur itself; and from upstream there's Cubby's Canyon and Little Bogie ladder and in-between there's the Pup Ridge."

It was an impressive list.

Jim objected. "Actually, Joe, you can't add up. Three does not equal seven. Cos you've just told us seven ways altogether. An' it wasn't *my* bushfire but cos the rocks exploded..."

Steve found the brotherly argument endearing. He capped it, saying, "We orta chuck Jim and Joe in the dam to cool them down."

Jack made peace by issuing decisive orders. "We'll go up Cubby's Canyon," he ruled. "Ben, Ken and Steve have only seen the top end at the Cave. Besides, going that way, we can take the Triplets' book back to them at The Secret Water. Then they'll know *that we know* they were here yesterday."

Joe asked the vital question. "Where'll we 'ave lunch, yo ho yep yes, lunch?"

Jack spoke more slowly while he thought what to say. "We could invite ourselves to eat with the Triplets and ask 'em for the GPS readings of our boundaries."

"What've we're not welcome?" asked Jim.

"In that case, we can go on to Little Bogie for lunch, and come back to Cubby's Canyon to go home. If we're running out of time, we can go up the ladder."

"What if the girls are there?"

"We'll meet that problem when we come to it," replied Jack, in his best grown-up manner.

* * * *

Packing up and tidying up took longer than they expected. The Lawsons kept to the style set by Greg and *The ABC of Camping*, plus the good example of the Shy Spy Triplets themselves. However, they left the

fire place operational, and propped the tent posts against one of the trees, with the wooden pegs on the ground at its base, as a pledge of 'next time'.

Finally, they took a sweeping look around and Joe announced, "It's as clean as a whistle and there's nothing cleaner than that."

"Saddle up," ordered Jack, "And move off a bit."

As soon as they moved a little way off, they spotted a few minute scraps of bacon rind, onion and potato peels. Jack chucked the food scraps into the nearest thicket, crying out, "In the name of ecology, I recycle you and replace you tenderly in the environment."

Jim picked up a handkerchief, put it in his pocket, and said, "All blah from the pet cemetery!"

Ben, Ken and Steve just laughed.

They moved off with Steve as pace setter, Jack as number three, and Jim as rear-guard.

They made no attempt at concealment emerging from The Narrow Way into Koala Creek. After all, no one was likely to be around who did not know their secret entrance already. Ken waved a farewell to The Thunderfall and they turned upstream.

At the wider gorge where The Secret Water was concealed by scrub, Jack halted. "It's not fair to barge in on 'em." He coo-eed several times.

The only response was faint echoes from far off.

So the six boys plunged through the trees to the grassy clearing at the pool. Jack yelled. "Dollermans ahoy! Anyone at home? Coo-ee!!"

Still no reply. It robbed the Lawsons of the satisfaction of surprised faces on the Shy Spy Triplets as they handed them their lost property.

Just in case the SST were heavily asleep, Jack parted the door flaps of the tent. He peeped in. No one.

Meanwhile, the visitors from Lahdidar examined the fireplace, the old seats and the new tent with great interest. The manufactured tent was of higher social caste than the home-made job. But it lacked charm.

Ben's comment was, "It's all so tidy."

Ken added, "And a beaut pool"

Steve murmured, "But dirty water."

Jack tore a page from his pocket log book and wrote a short note. He told them. "I put what Dad might have said: 'Who is the lost sheep? From Jack Lawson, Saturday, mid-morning.'" He tucked it into the Dollerman's New Testament, fished in his knapsack for an empty plastic bag, turned it inside-out to avoid sugar grains, and put the book in it. Against rain, he twisted the top of the bag, folded it over, tied it with string from his pocket, and hung it on the tent pole. He told his group, "*That'll show 'em.*"

Jim admired his brother's wit. "*And fix 'em.*"

Joe's thoughts were elsewhere. "What food have we got left? I reckon it's lunchtime."

Jack squinted critically at the sun and estimated the time from its altitude. "It's no more than eleven o'clock, but, if they come back and find us here, it'd be a bit awkward, don't you think?"

Jim had the answer. "We'd say we're just filling in time waiting politely to give you back your book."

That certainly sounded plausible.

The Lawsons unpacked every last bit of food. The visitors got a fire going. They scorned the carefully stacked heap of broken sticks beside the fireplace, gathered their own, and put on the billies.

Jack ran a critical eye over the left-over food. "We can just about gobble that lot in one sitting."

Jim grinned. "An' not carry anything home, which

proves what good Bush Boy Explorers we are.”

“And that we had none to waste,” added Jack.

The sausages were poked and frying in the dixies, and the sliced onions added, and the bread rolls cut and buttered, when they undressed and jumped into the pool.

Ken reminded himself, “When you can’t see through the water, diving’s not safe.”

No one attempted swimming underwater.

They came out, dressed partially, and with gusto tucked in to their last bushie lunch together.

Jaws munched and tea was sipped — it was too hot to swig — and the Lawsons talked freely with their mouths full. However, the visitors were a little silent. Jack guessed they were lamenting their imminent return to Lahdidar. Who’d want to live in Lahdidar after this? Certainly no boy in is right mind.

They left not a scrap of food, not a skerrick of rubbish — not even a foot print. Would the Triplets guess they had swum and eaten there as well as returning the New Testament?

Jim and Joe had no scruples in forgetting the noontide nap and the log books. But Jack was ‘a conscie’, as the army dubs those more conscientious soldiers who are always polishing things. However, *even* conscie Jack compromised. “Well, we *did* sleep in late and that’d just about count as a nap, and maybe I’ve told the time wrong so we’d better get going.” He brightened up. “We can write up our logs at home and yous can do ’em on the train.”

They moved off, with Ken in front, into the canyon.

In what Jack judged its deepest and darkest part, he got them to stop, while they craned their necks to try and see where they had looked down from above, all those ages ago at the start of their adventures together,

after coming from the station on the Wednesday.

"Cliffs and crags that beetled overhead," murmured Jim. But the visitors knew no poetry.

Nevertheless, Ben, Ken and Steve were suitably impressed. At Cubby's Cave, they wrote their praises of Cubby's Canyon. Ben spoke aloud as he wrote, "Thanks to Jack, Jim and Joe, it's the first time we've been allowed to *do* anything without girls."

Jim said, "We do things *with* and *without* them."

Now for the last lap. They climbed the spikes, barged through the prickly scrub, climbed the post-and-rail fence, galloped up the cattle track from the dam to the house. They were home.

* * * *

The family were only just settling down to lunch. The explorers dutifully greeted everyone. They had nodded to Cecilia Mahoney on Friday morning, but not yet her twin sisters Lucy and Agnes, who had come by train with Mr Lawson on Friday afternoon.

Jack, Jim and Joe had forgotten about Lucy and Agnes. Previously, they'd only seen them at church.

Jim was thinking, "Just imagine! Last night, six big girls were in the house. Glad we weren't here."

Mum told them, "We weren't sure if you'd be back so we've put off the main meal till tonight." She made a pretence of looking apologetically at Dad. "I mean, the convivium. But I'm sure you boys are hungry?"

"Starving!" declared Joe, stifling any memory of lunch an hour ago. "Yo ho yep yes we is, starvin'!"

Unblushingly, the others put on lean and hungry looks and cried in unison, "Yes, please!"

But Jack remembered his responsibilities. "What time's the train, Dad, for Ben, Ken, Steve and Bess?"

"On a 24 hour clock," said Dad, "at seventeen

hundred, 1700, or 5 p.m. While I'm driving them in, you might like to catch up on jobs."

* * * *

Dutiful Jack reminded himself how hard the twins had had to work in their absence. It was only right and proper that the boys pull their weight today.

He caught Jim's eye and pointed to the sink. Jim winked, prodded Joe, and the three boys got to work on the double wash up, from breakfast and lunch. Ben, Ken and Steve made to get up and help too, but Jack held up his hand at 'stop'. He opened and shut his fingers and palm for 'Start talking.'

Clearly, they were meant to relate their adventures.

Mum, Dad and Nanna, plus the six big girls, read this pantomime of gestures and its goodwill. They prompted the Lahdidar boys with questions.

For their part, Tilly, Tom and Bill listened eagerly.

The three Mahoney girls — who at home had two bigger sisters, three young brothers and two more sisters — enjoyed it with a maturity beyond their years.

"What did you eat?" "Who did the cooking?" "Did you wash?" "How well did you sleep?" "Did you get homesick?" "Did you get terribly tired?" "Would you go again?" "Did you see anybody?" "Did you talk at night?" "Did you miss the luxuries of home?" "Was anyone sick?"

Dad would have liked to ask, "Were there any accidents or near accidents?" Only recently had he learnt that *self-discovery* of the deadly dangers in the bush was just not good enough. However, he refrained, lest he alarm his wife and mother-in-law. He would find out later from his sons — after all, that was how Matthew Cumberland did things with Greg and Bernie.

Ben, Ken and Steve rose to the occasion and 'played

to the audience', as all the best actors do. Recounting the doings of those Great Days since Wednesday was to relive them, and to fix them firmly in their memories. How they would stun the city slickers at home and school with large slices of life, real life, from the wild world of the untamed bush! It softened somewhat the disappointment of having to go home. The next best thing to doing something is to talk about it.

Jack, Jim and Joe, even while they clattered plates and rattled cutlery, listened, and threw in an occasional comment. They minded what they might add when their own turn came at the evening convivium.

Ben was in the middle of an account of getting slewed in the tangle of ridges and gullies when Jack interrupted. "Please excuse me butting in, but we'll start on the wood heep while you keep talking."

Dad and Mum nodded approval.

Ben used matches from the box in his pocket to map things out on the table. He was still going 'yack-etty-yak' when Jim brought in the first barrow load and quietly filled the kitchen wood box.

Joe inspected his chooks and found them happy and contented, fed and watered, and no eggs uncollected.

Jack was hard at it, splitting logs and sawing more.

Jim shovelled up cow and horse manure to add to the dump at the twins' vegetable garden. Then he hosed out the barrow, for the next load of fuel for the other wood boxes.

Jack checked the big batteries on the front verandah and found they needed topping up with distilled water.

There was also rubbish to be sorted for direct recycling at home or through Galway Crags council.

Back in the kitchen, Mum, Nanna and the twins were started on a big roast dinner for the convivium.

The Lahdidar boys still talked on and on, despite regret at missing the evening feast. The Mahoney girls scarcely needed to prod them with more questions.

Out at the woodheap, Jack noted the lack of kindling. "The women've burnt the lot," he lamented, adding, with a grin, "just like Nanna said."

The three boys set off with barrow and rope. Just through the sliprails, they gathered all they wanted. When they got back, they broke the sticks and twigs to size, and found that Ben, Ken and Steve had not only lit the copper, showered, and got into their jeans, but were packing up their things, including all the things they hadn't needed and never used, just as Jack had foretold. But he knew it was not their fault.

The Lawson boys wanted to see their friends off at the station. But Dad said, "No. It wouldn't be fair. Your mother needs the girls here. Say your 'Good-byes' now." They obeyed without a grumble.

Even Joe could see that Dad was right.

At the van, saying final farewells, Jack and Jim promised to write to the Lahdidars about the things they'd like to hear about. Poor Ben, Ken and Steve: they admitted they'd never written a letter in their lives.

Nanna, with the advantage of age, liked to share her mountain top view of life. She used say things like, "I'm been there already, long ago, as a child, then growing up, next mothering, and finally grandmothering."

She beamed approvingly on all the youngsters as the farewells were said and the van drove off.

For a while all hearts were wistful.

Chapter 40

At the Convivium

Jack had summed things up even before the visitors had left. "You know, Jim, we did far more exploring with the softies than we ever did with our cousins, or with Mick and his mates."

Jim agreed. "Yair. We didn't get to Mount Zodiac but we discovered a new world — just like Columbus setting out for India and finding America."

Joe grinned. "And we did our first overnight camp before they came, yo, ho, yep yes."

Jim chuckled, "We're real Bush Boy Explorers."

When their evening jobs were done, Jack offered their services in the kitchen. There really was no need, not with two mothers, the twins, three Mahoney girls and Tilly. Even Tilly was almost a complete expert.

Colleen smiled on the boys. "Thank you all the same, but there's really no room in here *for boys*."

Jim teased Jack. "You knew she'd say that."

"Of course," grinned Jack, "but I meant it, too."

The water in the boys's copper was still hot from when the visitors lit it. They showered and got into pyjamas. It seemed ages since they had worn real pyjamas — actually two nights.

They got to work to bring their log books up to date. The entries were brief in the extreme.

And they polished their boots.

At the convivium, the boys were still out-numbered by the Mahoneys and their own sisters.

Dad invited Cecilia to give the first report. She had come back with the Lawson girls from church on Friday morning, and had lacked any chance of speaking

with the boys. Her twin sisters Lucy and Agnes had not arrived till Friday afternoon, when the boys were already off in the bush. So the recent doings of all six girls were quite unknown to Jack, Jim and Joe.

Cecilia smiled pleasantly all round, but addressed the boys. She was adept at dealing with young brothers. "Yesterday morning, you went down to Little Bogie, but Coll, Kath, Bess and I were not very far behind you."

Colleen interrupted. "We raced through the washing, so we could follow you. It was the first day of our holidays — we hadn't fudged by starting early..."

Jack and Jim glowered at her. They could ignore the mild jibe about holidays, but they resented being followed — by anyone, but especially by girls.

Kathleen was soothing. "We knew you weren't stopping at Little Bogie, and so you wouldn't mind."

Cecilia resumed. She beamed on the boys. "You didn't know, but you need to know now. *You* were being followed by the Dollerman boys."

That made them sit up. Even Kathleen the Peace-Maker smirked at their discomfiture.

Cecilia went on, "So we girls spied on the spies who spied on you. The top of the ladder was our spy lookout. We saw you high up the other side, when the boater hat boys were just leaving that upstairs cave in pursuit. You climbed out of sight. When the spies did too, we had a swim in the deep pool. Colleen told us how you nearly got drowned." Oooh! Whistle-blowing with a vengeance! Truth will out...!

It was frightful news for Mum, but Nanna and Dad knew already. Cecilia was so caught up in her tale, she never noticed the masks of horror. "We dived from the middle of the pole, the one Joey fell in from."

Later Jim told Jack, "She landed us in the soup,



"YOU WERE FOLLOWED"

boots and all, and without meaning to.”

Seemingly Cecilia could go on for ever. “We did somersaults round the pole and in the water...”

To save further contretemps, Kathleen butted in. “Soon after that, we had to hurry home. We’d left Tilly, Tommy and Billy to keep the copper fires going under the washing, and we still had to rinse and hang it on the line before lunch.”

This put the focus on the littlies. They blushed at being singled out. Jim’s conscience gave a jab: the boys really ought to be thanking the big girls and the littlies for all their work.

In her masterful fashion, Colleen again became narrator. “It was so hot, we knew the washing’d dry in a couple of hours. After lunch, we played doubles at tennis and Tilly made a partner for Cessy. We folded the washing as we took it off. We’d just started sorting it when Dad arrived with Lucy and Agnes. So we finished it quick-sticks and had afternoon tea.”

The two older Mahoney twins, Lucy and Agnes, took over the reporting. They took turns in building up a single sentence:

“We went up ladders through that spooky ceiling...”

“...and came out on your Pisgah Roof Room...”

“...and we looked all around through the telescope...”

“...but there were no boys in sight...”

“...and we remembered that our brother Harry...”

“told us that he’d told you the Dollerman gang were keen bushwalkers.”

“Of course, Harry, Mick and Bob are always in the bush themselves...”

“...always quoting Greg and Bernie Cumberland.”

After that, the Mahoney twins handed on the baton to the rest of the girls’ relay team.

Colleen's eyes gleamed. "This morning we took all our visitors, and Tilly, to our girls' pool".

Again, Jack and Jim exchanged glances. Well, they *had* actually given that pool to the girls already.

Colleen continued, "We explored the top and bottom caves and had billy tea in the top cave..."

The Lawson twins copied the Mahoney twins by completing each other's sentences. Kathleen went on, "...plus scones with jam and cream, though the cream got churned to butter from bouncing in our knapsack..."

Colleen cut in smoothly. "...And who do you think came along?" Jack and Jim glances met again.

"Yes," said Colleen, looking at them. "It was your very own Shy Spy Triplets. They looked very worried and didn't see us in the cave but hurried up the ladder."

Now Mum interrupted. "Just as I had asked them, they called in here, all honourable and polite, but they wouldn't stop even to sit down. They left this page for you, Jack — you can read it later. They fetched their electric bikes from the sliprails, sped past the house, waved to the littlies, but kept on going."

But Jack and Jim could not wait. They studied the paper at once. Jack said, "Latitude and longitude; back bearings and distances from the next location to the one before. What a calculator! But these figures are only for our property — nothing about Paradise."

Jim said, "Oh yes there is! It's got 'Tree Goliath', and Saul's Cave, what we call Grandfather Gum and Elijah's Cave. You were right, Joe, they were in *our* Paradise yesterday."

Joe swelled like Mr Toad. "They had plenty of time. We didn't get back till mid-arvo, yo ho yep yes."

It was Jack's turn. All this time, jaws had munched on auto-pilot. He started off gloomily, bad news first.

"Well, we've totally failed to find what the Shy Spy Triplets are up to. We still don't know."

Colleen suggested the obvious. "Well, why didn't you ask them? *I* would've!"

Jim retorted, "The trouble is, they're oysters. You have to prize them open to get at any pearls."

With lots of "Yo ho yep yes," Joe seconded Jim's account. Then Jim and Joe embellished Jack's report and adopted the new alternate-phrase reporting.

The oldies found it entertaining. Their heads swivelled left-right-left, like spectators at tennis. Their biggest pleasure was in the safe return of all concerned, and with all fingers and toes still attached, but also that the *Terra Sancta* boys had got on so well with the Lahdidar softies. Jack and Jim knew grown-ups don't like accidents, grouching, squabbling, whingeing, grumbling and all that, let alone punch-ups and bad will.

By the time the littlies got their turn, the prunes and rice had come and gone. Everyone was into mugs of tea. Usually the littlies spoke first, before sleepiness laid them out. This time, their seniors' accounts had kept them awake. They had plenty of zip in them, and wanted to boast of their own exploits.

Their doings ranged from helping Colleen and Kathleen in doing the boys' work, through to cooking with Nanna, or climbing trees without her. Work and play had merged in many deeply satisfying hours.

Nevertheless, it was not all trivia. Tilly held her brothers' attention. "This morning, *we* spied on those Shy Spy Triplets. They wuz collecting their whiz-bang bikes. *We* wuz there before 'em, playing hide and seek, and looking at their bikes. I was 'in' at the whippy, which wuz the sliprails, an' who came along? It was *them!* So Tommy and Billy kept hid — they wuz better

than usual — and I hid too.”

This was too long-winded for Joe. “But what did they say?” he demanded. “That’s all that matters.”

Tilly gave him her little-sister-look. “You’re *worse than usual*, Joe. Just you listen and you’ll hear.” She paused to let the reproof sink in. The others waited patiently. “Their boss boy said...”

“You mean Shadrach,” said Joe, quite unreprieved.

“As I said their *boss boy*,” Tiddy repeated firmly. “Well, he told his pals that ‘Father was pleased we’ve found the tallest tree. Now he’ll be even more pleased we’ve got its GPS’.”

Here she interrupted herself: “Whatever that is.” Then she went on, “‘The boss boy said, ‘But we haven’t found the goannas he wanted, though we found their scratch marks on the trees.’ After that, they got on their bikes and pedalled a bit, then their motors whirred and they wuz gone.”

“Goannas!” cried Jack. “So that’s what they’re after! Goannas up tall trees. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Oh yes it does,” groaned Jim. “He’s gonna use goannas to find more of our tall trees for his sawmill.”

“Rubbish!” wailed Joe. “He’s gonna make goanna oil out of my goanna Go-go and he’s jolly well not. He can buy it at the shop and rub on himself and maybe he’ll rub on so much his arms ’ll snap off at the elbows — like the man with the stockwhip. It’s so powerful, it’ll eat its way out of a glass bottle! And jolly well serve ’im right, yo ho yep yes.”

It was Mum and Dad’s turn to raise their eyebrows and exchange glances.

Dad looked round. “Thank you all for a wonderful convivium, and God bless the cooks. We’ll say grace after meals and the Rosary, and after that the biggies

can do the washing up. But bedtime as early as possible for everyone because we're going to the early Mass."

* * * *

Later, Nanna told Meg and Max. "The boys have done wonders with Ben, Ken and Steve. They came as softies and have gone home so self-reliant and very happy, bruised, battered, scratched and toughened with boyhood. Their parents'll be pleased with the difference."

* * * *

THE OTHER DOINGS of the Shy Spy Triplets that Saturday were a great unknown to the Lawsons.

While Jack, Jim, Joe and their visitors were breaking camp in Paradise, the SST had already left their Shady Refuge. They climbed out of Koala Creek via the ladder. Just as Mrs Lawson had explained, they had called in, and been introduced to Mr Lawson. He had chuckled to himself at their blend of old-world courtesy, shyness and embarrassment.

Shadrach had handed over his report and declined mid-morning refreshments: "Sorry, thank you, but we have to hurry." There was no explanation. Then he remembered, "Might I phone them at home, please?"

He got through to his mother. In the outcome, she arrived at Guntawang railway station at the same time as the SST on their bikes.

At home, at Galway Crag, no sooner were they 'fed and watered' like faithful horses, when Father drove in. He listened eagerly to the story of their adventures.

He summed up. "The time has come. I must go and see for myself. Take me to Paradise."

The boys were only too willing. While Mother made sandwiches for their lunches, they finished a snack.

Ernie sped down the Great Western Road. His younger adopted son, code-named Meshach by the

Cumberlands, asked, "But what if the Lawsons are still there at Paradise, Father?"

Ernie rejoined smoothly. "In that case, I'll be glad to meet them. Does that satisfy you, young Dennis?" The boys guessed that Mr Dollerman was developing some new and secret scheme. He was such a successful business man, poker-faced, yet never shy.

At Guntawang, Ernie called on Luigi. He knew him well. "Mind if we drive down your pasture to the creek?" It was a mere formality. Luigi beamed.

Ernie drove them through the gate and down the rough grassy hillside to Koala Creek.

He proved less speedy on foot. His lack of condition slowed them. Downstream in Koala Creek, they passed the ladder to *Terra Sancta*. Ernie plodded at the end of the line. They called in at Shady Refuge for him to admire their camp and have a rest.

Here they read Jack's note. Ernie chuckled at the neat Gospel allusion. "We've just missed them," he said, "it's only midday now."

Meshach looked hopeful. "Time for lunch?"

"Not yet," ruled Ernie. "Press on, please."

Going through the narrows to Paradise, Meshach offered to tow his foster father. "We've got a rope, and we can all pull you like a tug-of-war, to speed you up." He was rather like Joe Lawson.

As soon as Ernie got his first distant view of the Goliath tree, he put on speed.

Then came disappointment. It puzzled the SST. Ernie gazed up the mighty trunk long and hard. He moved round to get all sides. At last he spoke, trying to sound non-committal. "No scratches."

"You mean no goannas then?" mused Shadrach.

Meshach was more forthright. After all, for two

weeks they had been searching for the tallest tree, and then for a couple of days for scratch marks. He blurted out, "What do you want the goannas for, Father?"

Shadrach and Abednego looked at him expectantly. At last, Father was 'on the spot'.

Ernie answered carefully. "I didn't actually say, goannas, but scratches like goannas might make."

He knew he could not leave it at that. He went on, "I'll explain, after we've found them, and after I've got a few other things settled." He knew he wasn't really being fair to them, and he knew they knew. And they knew that he knew... But they were too polite to press him with questions.

Meanwhile, he was gazing up all the other tall trees. There were plenty of them. But no scratch marks.

They moved up the valley to the water-hole.

Abednego smoothed things over. "Will I light a fire and put the billy on, Uncle?" Father nodded.

"The Lawson mob have quit," grinned Meshach. "They get credits for clean-camping. It's even up to our standards. The only thing they've left is the fireplace and some tent poles." It was proof of the quality of boys they scarcely knew.

After a good lunch of sandwiches and tea, Ernie sighted. "I really need a snooze. I must recover, and get up enough energy to get home."

He sprawled out, hat over his eyes.

Shadrach asked, "May we have a swim, please?"

The hat nodded.

Later, when they set out for home, it was the hottest part of the day. They did not call at Shady Refuge. But Ernie did ask, "Are you leaving your tent set up?"

Shadrach answered, "It's a pledge of our return."

At Little Bogie, they rested in the shade of the lower

cave, and told Father about their use of the ladder.

Here Shadrach's memory stirred from its slumbers. "Father, it's coming back to me. Yesterday, just over the top of this ridge behind us" — he pointed to the roof of the cave — "there were scratch marks on the trees leading down to the valley on the other side. That was where we found the Lawsons."

For a while, Ernie said nothing. Then, deep in thought, he sighed, "Well, it'd too late to make a dash there today." He paused. "How about this? Sunday afternoon, tomorrow, could you three race over to that valley, and photo any scratch marks?"

His faithful cohorts were only too willing.

* * * *

THAT EVENING, back at *Terra Sancta*, last thing before bed, Joe was idly turning the pages of *An Australian Animal Book*.

Lacking a boy-proof binding, the book was tatty. It had grown old under the burden of its years, through several generations — since 1948, in fact. Joe beamed on his brothers. "I've got an idea!"

"What?"

He smirked. "I'll tell you tomorrow." Even if he forgot, their curiosity guaranteed that they would remind him.

But even with early Mass, would there be time to 'do' Joe's idea?



THEY GASPED AND GAPED