

Chapter 41

Joe's Great Idea

JACK, JIM AND JOE woke early and at once slotted back into their Sunday morning routine.

Dad, too, was up early, extra early, in fact. He had fired up the kitchen stove and the porridge was nearly ready. He told Jack and Jim, "Don't be long filling the wood boxes. Breakfast is almost ready. There'll be a second breakfast when we get home from Mass."

"Thanks, Dad," they said, and raced to the woodheap.

Joe lingered in the kitchen. "I forgot we're going to early Mass and I've forgot why."

Dad smiled. "Work it out for yourself. There are too many of us for the van to hold. So Jack'll drive you boys in the Land Rover to Kangaroo Corner. From there, you can walk to Mrs Castonelli's, and she'll take the five big girls in her twin-cab utility. Then you boys get in with the rest of us. Oh, and she's taking the Mahoney girls home first because they're needed for the choir at the late Mass."

Early Mass was giving Joe the time they would need for his Great Idea. He hissed his plan into Dad's ear. After a few questions, Dad readily agreed.

"Don't tell Jack and Jim," pleaded Joe. "I'll spring it on 'em at the second breakfast. I'll ask you if I can lead a tiger walk, and you just say, 'Okey dokey'."

Dad grinned. "Okey dokey, Joe." Then he looked thoughtful, for he was developing an idea of his own. But whatever it was, he did not tell Joe.

Dad now woke the rest of the family. "First breakfast porridge in five minutes. Hurry, hurry, hurry."

And they did hurry. However, as Dad knew, even

their hurry-up hurrying still took a quarter of an hour. Joe had time to feed last night's scraps to the chooks.

When Jack and Jim came back, the three boys set the table. Family prayers were briefer than usual and merged into grace before meals. Dad explained, "There'll be a second breakfast of egg and bacon on toast when we get back from church."

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This Sunday, Jack, Jim and Joe sat with the family at Mass. Greg and Bernie were serving, plus an acolyte and a bigger boy. After Mass, Greg introduced them to the third boy, Gerry. "These are Jack, Jim and Joe," he told Gerry, "and they usually serve the late Mass with the Mahoneys." And to the Lawsons, he said, "This is Gerry, and he's a new homeschooler and he works part-time job with Honest Bob¹ at *Bikies Galore* — and he's a real Bushy." Gerry beamed.

Jack and Jim would have liked to yarn, but Joe was pestering them to hurry. The big brothers were surprised to find Dad was supporting Joe. The thought crossed Jack's mind, "There's something going on. He whispered to Jim, "Mischief afoot!"

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On the way home, Kathleen remarked, "This is the first time for ages the van's been 'family only'."

Colleen pulled out a hanky and pretended to dry a tear. "Alas," she lamented, "all visitors gone."

As the boys changed into bush khaki, Joe gloated, "Just you wait till you hear what Dad says when I ask 'im, yo ho yep yes." After last night, this should have roused their curiosity, but it didn't.

Dad and Mum were even faster than the boys getting

1 See *Bush Boys on the Move* pp. 151 ff, 405 ff.

out of Sunday-best, and far quicker than the twins.

When the boys got to the kitchen, the big frying pan of half-cooked bacon was already on the stove top, sizzling with the draft full open. Soon after, Mum broke in the eggs, and basted them with spoonfuls of fat.

The fountain, too, soon came back to the boil. Jack made the tea. Jim and Joe made toast, buttered it and cooked the butter in. Jim proclaimed, "Like honey in the honeycomb". It was in the books he read.

As well as being hungry, Joe was more pleased than the others that the second breakfast was 'ready to roll'.

As soon as Dad said Grace before Meals, Joe opened the innings on his Grand Idea. "I say, Dad." He winked. Then, gobbling vigorously, he gabbled at high speed, "How-about-today I-get-my-first-go-at-being-leader-of-a-real-bush-boys' exploring-expedition-yo-ho-yep-yes-an'I take-Jack-an'-Jim (huff) on-a-Tiger-Walk (puff) of-top-secret-discovery?" With a final huff-puff, breath ran out.

Only now did Jack and Jim remember — they were supposed to remind Joe to announce his Grand Secret Idea from last night.

Dad responded in true Max Lawson style. First he asked their mother for her *yea* or *nay* on the request. Their astute sons Jack and Jim saw him wink, and drew their own conclusions.

Mrs Lawson pondered a moment. Without asking Joe what it was all about, she turned to Jack and Jim. "Would you mind letting Joe be your guide, while you look after him?" This was very neat. And obviously she knew more about it than she let on.

Fortunately, Jack and Jim were easier to get on with than most big brothers, especially those big brothers who have to deal with someone like Joe, for they ranked him, though never said so, not even to each other, as a

pip-squeak nuisance. Indeed, they were more amused than offended. Nevertheless, and quite reasonably, Jack replied with a question: "Where to, Joe?"

"I wanna give yous a pleasant surprise," drawled Joe, "yo ho yep yes, you'll enjoy it more not knowing."

Jack and Jim were thinking, 'Fancy being led to an unknown destination by such an inferior being!' Nevertheless, after a glance at Jim, Jack said, "Okay, but do we take our lunch?"

Again, Dad 'looked-a-question' at Mum.

Mum said, "Yes, the *convivium's* tonight, as usual."

Only after such proper consultation did Dad tell Joe, "Yo ho yep yes!" They laughed, including Joe. "But," he added, "I'd like you back for an early afternoon tea" — for he too had his own secret plan.

At once, Joe became very business-like, exactly as he had learnt from his brothers. "We'll take bread rolls with fillings, fruit and a billy, and not bother cooking snags, not on a tiger walk."

With that settled, they gulped down the rest of their bacon and eggs and toast. While their tea was cooling, they excused themselves, Jack and Jim to fix the food and Joe to fetch their hats and the knapsack.

The rest of the family continued to enjoy their eating at a peaceful holiday-holiday pace.

The older boys slit nine bread rolls for buttering and three fillings: cheese and tomato; sultanas; and marmalade jam. In between times, they swigged their tea in great gulps down well-tanned leathery throats that were used to taking it hot.

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Jim wrote on the whiteboard, "Left at 0930." Then, "Dad, do you know where we're going?"

Dad smiled at Jim's bushy common sense, and he

nodded. So with hats on heads and staffs in hand, and Jack with the knapsack, the tiger-walk trio made the usual fond farewells to the stay-at-homes and set out.

Joe took the lead and Jack positioned himself as rear-guard. Jack and Jim were not surprised when Joe started at a helter-skelter pace down the track towards Little Bogie. However, they did not expect his left turn onto their direct route to the Secret Water.

Here they skirted the deserted tent of the Shy Spy Triplets, and charged up the steep side of the Southern Bulwark. Joe never slacked in his tiger-walk pace and the others lacked breath to comment on, or question it.

When the climb levelled, for the final gentle slope up to the watershed, Jim asked, "Are we going to Lost World?"

Joe gave a tantalizing grin. It blended mystery and mischief, and muttered, "You'll see, yo ho yep yes you will." His good natured brothers put up with it.

He did not offer them a rest, but led them along the top to the east — it was a tribute to their fitness. Nor did he hesitate in his navigation. Far below in the gorge, they could see the Thunderfall and its pool.

For the first time since setting out, Joe pointed to features of interest. "See, up those trees — scratch marks. Are they animal, vegetable or human?"

Jack shook his head, while Jim opined, "Made by the tree itself, so I suppose you'd say 'vegetable'."

Joe grinned teasingly and, without comment or further ado, plunged off to the right.

A somewhat puzzled Jack said to Jim, "Well, he must be taking us back to Lost World."

Jim made the best of it. "Well, it's a tribute to our teaching him bush navigation."

Indeed, Joe not only spotted the best way around

the denser scrub, rocks and little cliffs, but confidently found a way where none of them had been before. Actually, it was more or less the route by which the Shy Spy Triplets had come out of Lost World on Friday.

This valley lacked the steep-sided cliffs of Koala Creek. They scorned abrasions from the vegetation, so again it was a helter-skelter half-on-the run descent.

No sooner had the slope flattened out than there in front of them lay the ruins of the old hut. Again, without the slightest hesitation, Joe swung right, and soon had them at Friday's lunch spot.

The others did not notice his glance up and about and how he grinned to himself before starting to kindle a fire on top of last Friday's charcoal. Jack and Jim took the hint, fetched more wood, set up a billy of water, and got out the lunch.

Jack led them in Grace without waiting for the tea. They had scarcely taken their first mouthfuls when Joe leapt to his feet. With a prance and a dance, he lunged like a bayonet and pointed dramatically up. "LOOK!"

They looked and they beheld.

They gasped and they gaped.

They too leapt up and pranced and danced.

So this was why Joe had brought them!

A great flood of talk burst forth, with total disregard for conventions about swallowing first. They had no idea what they were eating, nor, when the tea was made, how much they scalded those leathery throats.

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MEANWHILE, back at *Terra Sancta*, the twins were buttering bread rolls and putting in tasty fillings for an early lunch.

Dad, Mum, Nanna, the twins and the littlies were already at the table, and everyone was chattering.

Just before the twins brewed the tea and served out the rolls, Dad told them, "Wait on a bit. We won't start for a jiffy or two. It's like this. When I told the boys to be back for afternoon tea, I had still not finalized my own plan — which was to invite the National Park Ranger to afternoon tea. Well, first I had to phone the Cumberlands for his home number. Now I've invited him to meet our boys on their return. He'll be keen to hear of their exploits." The twins grinned. So this was why Dad wanted them back mid-afternoon.

He went on, "But since then, the message bank on the phone has something from Ernie Dollerman. He's invited himself to lunch — unless I ring back to the contrary. No doubt he wants to talk business, in spite of Sunday" — he grinned at his wife and her mother — "so we'll give him time to turn up — unless you younger ones are starving to death."

He glanced at the littlies. But even Tommy understood that an early start on eating might get him packed off for a snooze, and then he might miss out on something interesting.

When there was no dissent, Dad continued. "Mr Dollerman has adopted his two orphaned nephews, and a third nephew is living-in, and they are our Shy Spy Triplets. Now he is the man who was just too late to bid for *Terra Sancta* when we got it. After that, he told the estate agent, Sellum Queeck¹, he wanted to buy it from us. Remember, when I asked you what your thought, and we all agreed, 'No'?"

Just then, Tommy's pup Kanga gave a short sharp WHOOF! Tommy interpreted, "That means it's someone he knows; it's not his battle-bark for

1 Sellum Queeck, see *New Boys in the Bush* p. 18.

strangers." Nanna raised her eyebrows.

Colleen was first on her feet, as a volunteer to see who it might be. She was almost at the front door when the expected bang came on the massive knocker.

The next moment she swung it open. It was a middle-aged man in his Sunday-best, and he was pleasantly surprised at her Jack-in-the-Box appearance.

Her use of an historic greeting was a further pleasant surprise. "Mr Dollerman, I presume? Welcome."

Ernie Dollerman rose to the occasion. "Good-day, Miss Lawson," he greeted her. In keeping with these old world courtesies, she, ladylike, held out her hand to receive his handshake.

In the kitchen, there were introductions all round. Dad and Ernie knew each other by sight and reputation, but this was the first time they had spoken.

When everyone was seated, Dad said Grace, Tilly served the guest first, and they all tucked in.

At once, Tommy seized his chance: "Mr Dollerman, how did my dog know you? He only barked once."

As was his invariable practice, Ernie treated all youngsters with due gravity. "Your dog knew me, Tommy, even before Luigi Castonelli gave him to you, when he was called Caligula."

Tommy was impressed. So was everyone else.

Mr Dollerman now turned to the others. "I left my own youngsters near your gate. They're exploring — again. Indeed, I'm hoping they meet your own lads."

So that was it, thought Dad. This is not a business proposal, not yet at least. He explained, "They're exploring too, but should be back by mid-afternoon. I've got a surprise for them. They'll be meeting the National Parks Ranger, John Baldwin. He's coming, for afternoon tea. You know him?"

Ernie's face lit up at the mention of the name. "Of course, yes, we're good friends."

Dad did not say why the Ranger was coming, or what he had said to him on the phone, that, "It's a conservation issue and important for your work."

After lunch, when the littlies retired for their nap, Dad led the visitor up the ladders to the Pisgah Roof Room. Ernie liked the Biblical reference to Moses.

They gazed over the panorama of the National Park. Dad pointed to the places that Jack, Jim and Joe had explored, and how they were making their own map.

Ernie was intensely interested. Dad also pointed out the boundaries of the 40 acres of *Terra Sancta*.

His sons would have been mightily surprised that Dad knew so much and would have been proud of him.

In his turn, Ernie outlined where Dudley, Dennis and David had been, but did not say what they had found.

Dad grinned. "The Cumberland boys call them Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, on account of their getting cooked in the fiery furnace that scorching day."

Ernie smiled. If he knew the nicknames, he did not let on, but said simply, "Please thank them for me." And he still made no offer to buy the property, or any attempt to talk business. From this, Dad concluded — as later on he told the family — it was simply a goodwill visit, and implicitly ecumenical.

A barrage of barking burst from Kanga, his warning bark. This time it was longer, louder and repeated: "WHOOOF WHOOF WHOOF! WHOOF WHOOF WHOOF!"

There was defiance and challenge in that bark. Clearly, Kanga did not know the visitor.

It even roused Tommy and Billy from their nap.

Kathleen, anticipating a knock, was already hurrying down the long corridor. She arrived in time

to fling the door open before the knocking had finished.

There stood the ranger, resplendent in his National Parks uniform. She used her twin's style. "Mr John Baldwin, I presume? Welcome."

In the kitchen, there was another round of introductions. The Ranger chuckled. "If I'm too early, I apologize — I seem to have burst in on your lunch."

They reassured him. They were no sooner seated and had just started to yarn when there came a third WHOOF from Kanga, his shorter cheerier bark.

Who on earth could it be this time?



MR DOLLERMAN AND MR BALDWIN

Chapter 42

All's Well That Ends Well

BOISTEROUS and breathless, Jack, Jim and Joe burst into the kitchen, all agog with news.

Colleen winced. Would the visitors deem them rude?

But from their point of view, Jack and Jim were quite flummoxed to find company they did not expect. Their news was for the family, *not* for all and sundry... and most particularly, *not* for the father of the SST, nor for the man in the natty uniform, whoever he was.

Colleen and Kathleen smoothed things over. They handed their brothers mugs of tea. Their heartfelt 'thank you' must surely make the right impression?

Dad hastened to introduce the Ranger to Jack, Jim and Joe. He explained, "I invited him especially to meet you. Greg Cumberland always refers to him as, 'My friend the Ranger' — someone you need to know."

Jack was pleased at the Ranger's handshake — firm, with genuine sincerity, yet kind in its gentle strength.

Mum and Nanna had just started on the vegies for that night's convivium, and a huge leg of mutton was already sizzling in the oven. Mum rebuked her sons. "Tut tut! Your hair's all wet and your clothes damp".

Jack grinned. "Joe got us slightly slewed on the way back and we came down onto Koala Creek at the Thunderfall. He wanted a victory swim. We humoured him. We came out of Paradise the short way, via Joseph's Dream and the Giant's Causeway. So we're later than we meant to be."

The Ranger and Mr Dollerman were suitably impressed with this account, especially the names.

Joe, for his part, unlike Jack and Jim, was never

embarrassed by anyone. He did not go in for embarrassment. For him, visitors made no difference, and he felt no need to be introduced to strangers. Like an Old Testament prophet, loud and clear, he trumpeted forth the latest news on the Creator's wondrous doings. Besides, it was his personal victory as well.

So he blurted it out. "Dad, we've found koalas!!!"

Stunned silence! He let them savour it. Then, "Yo ho yep yes, I wuz right, Dad. Koalas all right, up those trees in Lost World. And we've got photos."

He brandished his Dad's camera — borrowed with permission — and handed it to Jim, to make it work.

The stunned silence said, "Please tell us more."

Even Bridget in Nanna's arms ceased her little crooning. Her eyes were wide with wonderment.

Dad was first to speak. Was he pleased? He was triumphant! "Congratulations, Joe. 'Yo ho yep yes' for sure! It was your idea to go back and check. And thank you, Jack and Jim, for your vital part in taking him. Without you, Joe could not have done it."

Clearly, the audience was impressed. Just fancy! A koala colony! And so close to *Terra Sancta*.

Jim pressed or rubbed the right places on the camera and unveiled the evidence. Joe paraded the camera round the group: Dad first, then Mum, Nanna, the twins, the littlies, and lastly the Ranger and Mr Dollerman.

Joe never miss a chance for an audience. "There are lots more, and a movie of when I poked the closest one with a long stick, but Jack and Jim stopped me."

"I should think so," murmured his mother.

Joe was patient. "We had to make sure they was alive. If they're alive, they move if yer poke 'em." He looked longingly at the scones. "We're hungry..."

The men were deep in their own thoughts. Ever

since Joe's proposal at breakfast, Dad had been hoping against hope. What would the investigations at Lost World discover? Would his sons find the koalas that Joe foretold? For this hope he had invited the Ranger to meet the boys. Koalas in the Wild Bush Mountains National Park were very much his business.

For his part, the Ranger was watching Ernie closely. Clearly, these men had secrets to guard, too.

But now the Ranger turned to Jack, Jim and Joe. "Congratulations, you Bush Boy Explorers — as your father tells me you call yourselves. You seem to know Greg and Bernie Cumberland of *The Hills of Home*?"

They grinned agreement.

With a nod, the Ranger prompted Ernie Dollerman to speak. Despite his repute for poker-faced business, Ernie had flushed slightly when Joe broke the news.

He glanced at the Ranger. "Well, John, only you knew. My hope all along has been to find the long lost koalas of Koala Creek."

Jack knew that youngsters do not butt in to adult conversation. But he could no longer restrain himself.

He glanced at his father, then burst out: "Excuse me, please, Mr Dollerman. You mean to say that the..." — he was going to say, 'Shy Spy Triplets', but that would never do. He remembered their Cumberland names, 'Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego'. But that would not do either. He gulped, raking his memory.

Jim, so perceptive and quick-thinking, helped him. "He means your sons and nephew, Mr Dollerman."

Jack looked gratefully at Jim. And their real names came back to him. "Do you mean to say that Dudley, Dennis and David were only pretending to look for tall trees and it was just a cover up for looking for koalas?"

His outburst embarrassed Mum and Dad. But Ernie

was even more embarrassed. He blushed very pink.

He was doubly caught out: not only his own secret plans, but *using* his family without them knowing it.

But before he could utter a word...

WHOOF WHOOF WHOOF! WHOOF WHOOF WHOOF! came from Kanga — his battle-bark for strangers.

"I'll go," announced Tommy. "He's my dog — but don't yous say anything till I get back, it's too exciting."

"I'm coming too," added Billy. To the others, he explained, "He's sort of my dog, too."

They had not long to wait. Even so, Jack, Jim and Joe did not miss a chance to swig more tea and polish off more scones with whipped cream and marmalade.

All listened. The front door knocker went Boom-Bang-Bong — like a sledge hammer thudding on a steel wedge in hardwood. There was a slight pause. Tommy wrestled with the stiff sliding bolt of the ancient lock. Then came the squeak-creak of the door, quite audible in the kitchen.

Indeed, for the benefit of the kitchen, Billy hissed loudly over his shoulder, "It's the Shy Spy Triplets."

In a slightly deeper treble, his brother corrected him. "That's not their names, Billy. They're Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego."

Three deeper voices, loud and assertive, broke in:

"It's Dudley Dollerman!"

"It's Dennis Dollerman!"

"It's David Marsden!"

"You're welcome. Come on in!" bellowed Mr Lawson. His voice was lifted loud to carry round the corners. It made his wife jump. "Tom and Bill, bring 'em in." Only then, the Lawsons realized that Ernie must have told the Triplets to meet him at *Terra Sancta*.

Like a pair of tow trucks, the small boys hauled the

Triplets to the kitchen. Introductions were not needed, and hearty greetings were exchanged.

The twins made more tea.

Everyone could see that the Triplets were bursting with news. But like the Lawson boys, they were inhibited by the company. It was not news that could be revealed to the Lawsons or to the Ranger. They had been hoping they would have an opportunity to take Ernie aside on his own.

Reading their excited faces, and knowing what he had sent them out to do, Ernie could guess their news...

And since Joe's outburst, everything had changed.

The twins and Tilly helped Ernie recover his aplomb. They put the Triplets at their ease by handing them mugs of tea. Like magicians, they had whisked another huge baking tray of piping hot scones from the oven. Cream and jam were at hand. The Triplets knew what to do. They tucked in. It was all so homely.

At last, Ernie spoke. "I think, boys, we know your news already. Please speak up freely and tell everyone."

Shadrach was relieved. Like Jack, Jim and Joe before him, his news was of the sort that brooks no delay whatever. It needed telling at once. He burst out, "Father! We've found koalas in Goanna Rill!"

Lest anyone think this was a further colony of koalas, Jack hissed in a loud whisper, "Goanna Rill's the creek in our Lost World valley."

Abednego, too, chimed in. "Uncle. These koalas were up tall trees and they made scratch marks. Now" — and his voice took on an almost accusatory note — "at first, *you* told us to find the tallest tree, and we did. We found you The Giant. Then you told us to report on scratch marks like goannas make. *But you never told us we were looking for koalas.*" In the silence, he

seemed to stare his uncle out. Then he demanded, "Were you really expecting us to find them all along?"

Poor Ernie! Again, he was reduced to embarrassment, just as he had been earlier, when Jack asked a similar question. There was reproach in nephew David's voice... As for Shadrach, he had suspected for some time that his father was concealing something.

Fortunately, the other parents were understanding. It was obvious they felt for Ernie.

Ernie knew the time had come. He must own up, make a clean breast of it. He addressed Max Lawson, but included everyone, especially his own family.

"Max. When I found out too late that Sellum Queeck had sold you *Terra Sancta*, I told him I'd cap it with a bigger offer and buy it from you. My plan was to open a bush camp for the Academy of Bible Christians. As well, I was also hoping to find koalas on your property, and to open a Koala Park for tourists. The profits were to go to the Galway Craggs Base Hospital."

They nodded in sympathy. Ernie was genuine through and through in his generosity. He went on, "But I had to keep the koalas strictly secret. Shooters and trappers might be tempted to repeat the unhappy history of the past... The only way to keep it a secret was to tell no one that there was a secret. The only exception was the Ranger, John Baldwin here. He knew my hopes." He turned to the Triplets. "So I apologize to you, my sons and nephew, for keeping even you in the dark. I asked you to look for the tallest tree. I hoped that by a lot of looking up, you would eventually find the koalas."

Everyone laughed.

What is more, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego laughed more than anyone. Clearly, they did not resent

Ernie's evasive tactics... though it might be better to call it concealment.

Shadrach spoke. "I can assure you, Father, we do not mind at all. You gave us an excuse to roam the bush. We're glad it's ended in such a spectacular surprise as our friends" — he glanced at Jack, Jim and Joe — "finding a colony of koalas, and us not far behind."

Ernie was grateful. He continued his explanation, albeit half apologetically. "When you found the great tree Goliath in that valley your friends call Paradise, I set you a new task, to look for scratch marks *such as* a goanna might make. I admit it was misleading. But I did not actually say to look for goannas."

Later on, comparing notes, the Lawson parents and Nanna thought Ernie had really been a bit too secretive.

In his usual friendly way, Max Lawson smiled his goodwill around the group. "We ought to have a brief account from the boys — in chronological order."

Joe hissed to Jim. "What's *chrono* what he said?"

Jim whispered back. "It means say what happened in the order it happened. So you're first."

All eyes swivelled onto Joe. Nothing pleased Joe more. His mug was refilled. He paused for a big gulp of hot tea. "Yo ho yep yes! Last Friday, when yous" — he waved at the Shy Spy Triplets — "found us snoozing after lunch at Lost World, what yous and the Cumberlands called Goanna Rill, we still hadn't spotted the koalas. *I*" — the perpendicular pronoun was heavily emphasized and now repeated — "*I* had just started takin' notice of a brown bag of something up a tree, when wees got talking to yous." Apparently 'wees' was a new plural of 'we', to rhyme with 'yous' — but this was not the time for grammatical niceties.

He continued, "It wasn't till last night, when we'd

got home and before bed, that I had time to think. That brown bag looked like a shapeless lumpy pillow covered with a sort of pillow slip of ash-grey fur. It didn't move. It looked like a knobule" — another new word rhyming with 'globule' — "on the tree. So it didn't made me think of animals, not even dead ones or asleep.

"But then I got an idea. Koalas. I looked 'em up in *An Australian Animal Book*. It had a picture. But all I told Jack and Jim was that *I had an idea...*"

Jim explained to the visitors. "Us Lawsons norm'y have ideas." This was received with a chuckle from the Ranger and sympathetic grins all round.

Joe concluded. "This morning, I told Dad, and he agreed to let us go an look at the knobule to make sure. Goin' to early Mass fitted in beaut. Later, when Jack an' Jim tried to wheedle it out of me, I kept it as a surprise." He turned to Jack. "Your go, Jack."

Jack took over. "Well, we raced down to Koala Creek — now we can appreciate its name. When we got to Lost World, Joe must've checked that the 'lump' was really alive and had not moved. But he said nothing. Not till we were eating lunch. Then he pointed up and said, 'Look! Only then it dawned on Jim and me — a koala!"

Joe interrupted to brag, "I'm the first in the family to see a koala in the bush. Didn't I tell you *we have to look up?* Didn't I tell you about Baden-Powell? At boarding school he used to hide up trees? An' teachers hunted for him for wagging classes? Didn't I tell you he lay along a branch and looked down at 'em, but *they never looked up?* Didn't I tell you it was good practice for him dodging the savages in darkest Africa?"

Jim grinned. "Yes, Joe you did tell us — and more than once." Jack, too, grinned. Obviously, he agreed.

Joe took no offence — for him, all publicity was good publicity, even infamy, especially infamy.

Jack reflected. "It's just as well Joe didn't tell us in advance, because I *thought* I knew that koalas were extinct in the Wild Bush Mountains and so we might've though it a waste of time and refused to go with him."

Jim took over the narrative. "I guessed there'd have to be more than one. We looked up other trees and soon found a dozen. And Jack wanted to change our name 'Lost World' to 'Colo Vale'."

"Yeah," asserted Jack, "the explorer Barrallier said the aborigines named them 'colo', so Colo Vale would be truth. Oh, Barrallier was the first explorer to write down that he'd heard the Coo-ee signal."

"Anyhow," Jim concluded, "We decided to keep the koalas secret for the family cos we didn't want louts shooting 'em — or even tickling 'em with sticks."

Joe echoed him. "No guns an' no tickling!"

Till now, Mum had not spoken since the damp hair and damp clothes. She pointed to the clock. "Time's flying and we must get the big meal over early. I'd invite you all if it weren't for the Bush Fire Brigade Dance tonight. So it's time we heard from Dudley, Dennis and David."

The older pair of Spies suddenly went shy. Dudley said, "I've had my go all ready." David said the same.

Only the youngest, Dennis Dollerman, spoke up. He said, "We saw a baby koala peeping over it mother's shoulder. We knew there used be a lots of koalas, but the shooters shot 'em dead, cos they were easy targets and just blinked sleepily at 'em. Or they shot 'em for their skins to make furs for ladies." Something else occurred to him. "So Dud said we'd keep it all secret till we'd told Dad, and now you Lawsons got there

first." A suspicion crossed his mind. "Or did you? How do *you* know we didn't get there before you?"

Colleen nudged Kathleen. "He's just like Joe!"

Dudley seemed to be changing the subject to keep the peace. He waved an A7 note book. "I found it this afternoon. It's got your name on it, Jack, so I didn't read it." He handed it over. "Can you prove to Doubting Dennis that you didn't lose it on Friday?"

Jack groped in his shirt pocket and found it empty. "I didn't know I'd lost it! You see, it's too big for the pocket flap to shut on it." Then he remembered something. "But I wrote in it today." Aha — proof! He handed it back. "Please read out the last entry, Dudley."

With bated breath, they listened Dudley read. "Sunday, 10th December: Joe found a koala in the valley of Lost World. Jim found lots more. Joe took photos."

The Ranger slapped his knee. "Proof positive!"

Dennis protested stubbornly. "But he hasn't put down a time. It might be after us..."

Ernie said dryly, "But he left the book there *before* you arrived to find it..." He turned to Meg and Max. "Thank you so much for having us, for your fellowship and the scones. Indeed, I do hope Mrs Dollerman will meet you, both here and at our home."

"I must go too," said John Baldwin, "I've ranger's work ahead. But there's three things I really must say before we part."

Aha! thought Jack. This'll be worth listening to. And it was.

Chapter 43

Further Thrilling Episodes

THE RANGER packed a lot into a good-bye. "Thank you heartily, Max and Meg, Mrs Cox and young ladies, for having me and for a wonderful afternoon tea.

"And thank you, you three Lawson boys, for your wonderful 'find' in the National Park, and you Dollerman boys for your parallel effort. Your exploring reminds me of Amundsen just beating Scott to the South Pole..." He smiled at each of the six boys.

Then with great earnestness, "I beg all of you here, for the time being, to keep this find strictly secret. When the National Parks decide to release the news, I shall see you get the credit you so richly deserve. In the meantime, we must save the defenceless from the ignorant, the blunderers and butchers in our society.

"The third thing is about my work tonight. And tomorrow. I think you need to know about it."

Ernie interrupted. "Just before you go on, John, I must tell you my idea for the 'defenceless'."

John Baldwin smiled. "No, Ernie. Not this afternoon. These good folk are on a tight schedule, and so am I. Keep the Secret and your idea will keep, too."

Ernie surrendered with a gracious bow.

John Baldwin hurried on. "You need some background. Early on Thursday morning, three boys from the Wild Bush Mountains Grammar School set out on an overnight walk. This is Sunday and they have not returned. The police were notified Friday night. They advised the anxious parents to wait one more day — often such groups are only benighted. We list them as 'overdue'. Last night, they were relisted as 'lost' and

police search parties set out this morning. Tomorrow, Monday, the search will escalate with the police co-ordinating a dozen groups. There'll be more rangers like me, plus other National Parks people, and several volunteer local groups plus Bushwalking Clubs from far away in the big city smoke — their clubs have their own Search & Rescue Groups, and some even bring their own doctors, if they expect the worst."

Max Lawson interrupted. "Where were they going? I've got a personal interest. In the New Year, I'll be teaching at the Wild Bush Mountains Grammar School."

John Baldwin spelled it out. "It's north of the railway at Galway Crag, Max, in what's called the Midnight Maze. It's a muddle of cliffs and canyons as tangled as spaghetti, all gooey and knotted up. The ridges and creeks have no pattern. They're a nightmare on the map and more so on the ground — ridges running every-which-way and deep saddles, and a bamboozlement of re-entrant ridges. The gorges get deeper and deeper, more and more hostile to man, with deadly poisonous snakes, polluted water and scratchy scrub everywhere, until they all end up in the Gross River — gross by name and gross by nature. In winter, the gorge of the Gross is freezing; in summer, it's an oven. It runs into the Patterson River alongside two great peaks, Mount Despair and Mount Domineering."

Mum and Nanna buried their faces in their hands.

Colleen and Kathleen looked stunned.

But as for the six boys... Their faces lit up.

At once, Shadrach, who was really Dudley, appealed to his father, on behalf of himself, his brother and cousin. "Sir, may we help in the search? It would be on behalf of the Academy of Bible Christians..."

Before Mr Dollerman could answer, Jack put in his

bid, too. "Dad, may we go? Think of all the practice we've just had, preparing for it. For Search & Rescues. Think of all the new *discoveries* we'll make."

Dad was already shaking his head. And even more forcefully than usual. Mum thundered, "NO!"

Then Dad reasoned with them. "You don't know that country. And you need a lot more experience. Better you master this area south of *Terra Sancta*. It would be different if the search were this side of the railway. Be patient. Your turn will come..."

The Ranger continued, "Greg and Bernie and their cousin Peter are going, but they'll be led by Matt Cumberland who was a major in the Reserve Army. Every party which the police authorize will have a satellite phone with range even in the deepest gorges."

Finally, Ernie answered Dudley. "I'll decide later, yea or nay. But we really must be going. Good bye, dear Lawsons, and thank you. God bless you all."

And the Ranger took his chance to scoot, too.

The family saw the visitors off from the front door.

* * * *

"Action stations!" cried Dad Jobs! Convivium! Showers! An early start and early home for the littlies."

Mum added, "Eat in half an hour — or I'll feed it to Kanga and the cat, and Go Go and the chooks..."

* * * *

The family piled happily into the van.

Colleen and Kathleen were resplendent in the dresses they themselves had made. Their escorts were to be some older boys from Galway Crag, boys of whom the Mahoney parents and daughters approved.

The Lawson boys were in their church clothes.

Joe was remembering vital facts. "Koalas sleep 18 or 19 hours a day and come out at night. They eat and

sleep in trees and only go to ground to get to another tree. The only animal they resemble is a wombat, and like them they have a backward-opening pouch."

"Sssh!" ordered Mum. "Keep it to yourself. Don't even think about it. Control your run away tongue."

"Yes, Joe," Colleen added primly. "In the books I've read, the heroines warn their friends not even to mention, let alone boast, that they have a secret."

"Huh!" Jim put in scornfully. "*That's* because yous and your heroines and their friends are all girls."

With a dry chuckle, Dad spoke positively. "Jim, your mother is the greatest heroine you know."

* * * *

They arrived at the dance.

Joe protested, "I don't wanna dance, it's sissy. Yo ho yep yes it is. I wanna go home."

Kathleen looked at him speculatively. She spoke slowly, as if not too sure of herself. "We *do* need someone to cut up the oranges... It'd be a man's job, of course, and he wears a specially tough apron, like a carpenter." She paused and looked doubtful. "Someone like you, Joe — you'd only cut himself. You're not really old enough. No, I don't think you could do it."

Jack and Jim's eyes met. How cunning.

True to form, Joe snorted, "Of course, I can."

"Well," said Kathleen, ever so sweetly. "Here's the apron and the knife and over there are the oranges. Better cut 'em into eighths — if you can."

Joe dropped the first orange.

Colleen and Kathleen shook their heads.

Joe told them, "Dirt doesn't matter, cos oranges've got skins — an' I'll dust it on my apron 'fore I cut it."

Kate Cumberland asked Joe for the next dance. She was about his age, and at least he'd heard of her.

He was ungracious. He forgot he should be asking her and withered her with a look. He said, "Ask Jim."

She did, and merrily off they went. Joe kept on cutting up oranges. Now and again he had a suck, just to make sure they had not gone bad.

Besides cutting oranges, Joe had time to look around. He was amazed at how many people he knew: Mr Mike Mistry from the St Vincent de Paul at Galway Craggs, Mr Adam McGinty, editor of the local paper, and the genealogist woman, Miss Maisie Tanglewebb.

The Dollermans were missing, but they did not dance. And the Ranger was busy getting the Search and Rescue organized with Sergeant McGillicuddy and the police.

Dad was talking to a distinguished looking man.

Jack, who had just been introduced to him, told Joe that he was Dad's new boss, Dr Percy Pinn. Even Joe could understand that the principal of the Wild Blue Mountains Grammar School would be needed for public relations and not roaming the bush in his good suit.

* * * *

As Luigi Castonelli had foreseen¹, gatecrashers were more than likely. And he was not kept waiting. A gang of them skidded in with a screech of brakes and a splatter of gravel. They spilled out of their car in a blast of quadraphonic sound — sound promoted to the level of a narcotic.

Luigi was in his orange fire-fighting outfit, at the ready, hopeful and even gloating. He called over his shoulder to the Lawsons boys, "Cumma watch!"

Without doubt, thought Joe, this'll be the best part of the dance. He was not disappointed.

First, Luigi blocked the doorway. He looked old and

¹ See *New Boys in the Bush* p. 71.

ineffectual. Kindly and quietly he spoke to the three young men and two young women. "Yous must go" — he pointed down the highway. "Yous not invited to this dance, yous in jeans, yous not welcome."

The lank-haired driver scoffed. "Yer stupid old dago! You old spaghetti walla! We're coming in, an' you'd better not tryin' ter stop us!"

This was all the provocation Luigi needed. He raised his right hand high and bellowed, "Testa de hoses!" and stepped back smartly.

In the shadows unlit by the outside lights, on each flank of the building, stood a fire-tanker, at the ready. When the invaders in brazen openness had paused in the brightly lit entrance, they did not see the two men in the shadows, though the latter wore the distinctive bright orange uniforms of the fire-fighters. Swiftly they mounted the back of the fire-trucks and stood to their swivel-mounted hose nozzles.

On Luigi's command, one of them thumbed the starter button. The motor of the fire pump thundered into life. There was no delay. From both sides, solid jets of high pressure water converged on the feet of the gate-crashers and immediately started creeping higher, battering rams of *solid* water, like a bursting dam.

What with splashings off the concrete and the side spray, the jean-clad figures were soaked instantly. Sheets of water cascaded off them — as pledge of a full blast on the chest, to dump them into the gutter.

The young men yelled murder and promised it. The young women screamed threats and hate. Nevertheless, they ran for refuge, their car. The water followed them in. The loutish driver spun the car off the entrance in a stink of burning rubber and shriek of tortured tires, and shot off down the highway, hastened

on his way by the hoses... Fortunately, at that moment there was no other traffic. Then the pump was turned off and the band could be heard once more.

For Joe at least, the high point of the dance was over. Only the consolation of 'the eats' remained.

Luigi explained, "Fire's out. They rotten egg gas."

Of course, when the action started, others besides Joe, Jim and Jack, including Greg and Bernie, had hastened to the doorway.

When the excitement was over, the Cumberlands introduced them to their cousins Peter and John, and friends Kev Keys and Sam Kalombo.

These boys from Coachwood Falls, plus the Mahoney boys, had a surplus of sisters whom they escorted, along with other escorts, friends from Galway Crag.

There was a great shaking of hands, thumping of backs and a babble of talk. Indeed, there was nowhere near enough time to share their recent doings and their prospects as search parties on the morrow.

This informal gathering of so many bush boys was shattered by the young ladies. They had been abandoned, just as the caller was explaining the next dance.

Reluctantly, the boys did their duty.

* * * *

Luigi introduced Max and Meg Lawson to Sam's parents. "Dey Kalumbos takes over in January when me an' Caterina retires," he explained. His beaming smile was matched by the black Nigerian and his white wife. Then Max and Meg met Sam, who was jet black, and Sam's sisters, who were coffee coloured. They were joyful people, well worth knowing.

And the dance went on and oranges were sucked and the tea and coffee served and cakes passed round with enough over to be taken home. After consuming

considerably more than his share, even Joe admitted there was something in this dance business and he wouldn't mind coming to another...

* * * *

On the drive home, Joe flaked out. He and the littlies curled up in their seats, fast asleep.

Jim, however, had got his second wind. His mind was running on the missing bushwalkers and the grand Search & Rescue. He brought up the subject, delicately and with consummate cunning. He asked Dad, "Are there any dingoes in the Wild Bush Mountains?"

"I ask the Ranger that myself," chuckled Dad. "He said there are no dingoes round here — not now. And he added, 'The only dingoes in Galway Crags are in business, and Ernie Dollerman is *not* one of them.'"

Jim ignored the joke. "That means then, Dad, there are no dangers we have not already met." He paused. "Well, we've proved we have the bush skills to handle all the other dangers..."

Jack listened eagerly. Did Dad get what Jim was at?

He was not left long in doubt. "Jim," said Dad, "I know what you're wheedling at. But look at it this way. The twins would like you to fence their vegetable garden against rabbits and wombats. And Joe has plans for a bigger chookyard, to breed up and double the number of laying hens, now that Luigi's built up a market for farm eggs. Remember, he's handing over to the Kalumbo family. We Lawsons make enough scraps to feed a lot more chooks, especially with them free-ranging by day. There's no way you can go on a hunt for the boys lost north of the railway."

Wisely, Jim said no more. But he went on thinking out schemes. Jack could tell.

However, neither the Ranger nor any resident of the

Wild Bush Mountains, let alone anywhere else, nor the boys, could possibly foresee what would transpire. As usual with Divine Providence, the future was hidden from their eyes, and just as well.

* * * *

Joe was still fast asleep when Jack and Jim carried him to their room, took off his boots and socks, and put him into bed, in his Sunday clothes and all.

Late though it was, Dad knocked at the door and came in. "With all the excitement and visitors, I've forgotten to tell you. Tomorrow, Colleen and Kathleen are having a holiday from routine. They're going to stay with the Mahoney girls in Galway Craggs till next Sunday. Can I depend on you to take over the laundry on Monday, Wednesday and Friday? Not just the fires under the coppers, but the whole show, boiling up the clothes and nappies, hanging them on the line, getting them off, folding them, and putting them away?"

He waited expectantly. Would they rise to the challenge? Would they be noble?"

As so often, Jack and Jim's glances met. Instinctively, they understood each other.

Of course, they would *much rather not*. Especially woman's work! But how kind the twins had been to them, letting them off the washing-up on numerous occasions, sewing up their tent, and doing the boys' daily jobs so they could take their visitors exploring.

Yet it would mean being terribly tied down...

As one, they grinned at Dad. "Of course we will."

In the event, it all turned out more exciting than anything they could possibly have imagined.

THE END

EPILOGUE

SOON afterwards, news came from Auntie Irene. She told Mrs Lawson, "Mick Mullin's Mum has given up paid work to become a full time old-style home-maker, with time aplenty to help the needy in Lahdidar and Boxwatch, and Ken's Mum and Dad hope to have more children."

Irene went on, "What's more, we are going to try homeschooling and I'll be needing your detailed advice.

* * * *

All Jack, Jim and Joe knew was that Mick with his friends Rick and Phil, and Ben with his friends Ken and Steve, kept up a string of emails, phone calls and even snail mail, pestering them to be invited back to *Terra Sancta*, for further thrilling episodes in the adventures that went with the life of the Lawsons in the great outdoors.

* * * *

Life at *Terra Sancta* continued at the same great pace. Seemingly it was much the same, day by day, yet every day was full and satisfying.

Dad told them to 'count their blessings' — which he helped them to itemize by his dialogue technique of 'guided discovery':

- The wonder of the world in the beauty of the bush.
- Growing in manliness, modesty and manners.
- Giving glory to God in the highest —
- since heaven and earth are full of His glory.