

Reg Lumley's final exit, although perfectly respectable, was accompanied by such lurid flames of publicity that in death the young man took on an almost phoenix-like quality of colourful resurrection from the burning hotel. The Warragul Store where for fifteen insignificant years he had worked and argued and held forth, was closed for half a day on the occasion of the Lumleys' funeral, a public tribute that might or might not have been appreciated by the deceased, at last unable to voice his opinions.

In the previous chapter we witnessed a segment of the pattern begun at Hanging Rock literally burning itself out, five weeks later, in a city hotel. During the week-end of the fire, yet another was gradually coming to a freezing standstill amongst the mountain mists at Lake View. Mike had been nearly a week in town and the Fitzhuberts had returned to Toorak for the winter when a solicitors letter,

*authorial
voice*

mismaid, had obliged him to spend a couple of nights at Mount Macedon. Albert had met him at the Macedon station with the cob on the evening of Saturday the twenty-first – actually his train passed within inches of the Lumleys, en route for Melbourne. As the dog-cart passed under the now leafless avenue of chestnuts it had begun, almost imperceptibly, to sleet. 'Winter coming early this year all right,' Albert said, turning up his collar. 'Don't wonder all the nobs that can afford to clear out for the winter.' There were only a few lights burning in the usually brilliantly lit façade of the house. 'Cook hasn't left for her holiday yet but the Biddies have gone with the family to Toorak. Your old room's ready and a fire laid.' He grinned. 'You know how to light a wood fire?' A single light burned dimly in the hall and through the open door of the drawing-room they glimpsed the shrouded sofas and chairs. 'Not too lively up here, is it? Better eat your dinner and come on down to me at the stables. I've got a bottle of grog the Colonel give me the day he left.' Mike however was tired and dispirited and promised to come tomorrow.

The Lake View house emptied of the day-to-day presence of its owners was dull and lifeless. It existed only as a comfortable holiday background for his Aunt and Uncle and had no personality of its own. Michael, eating his chop on a tray by the fire, was dimly conscious of the difference between Lake View and Haddingham Hall, whose ivied walls had existed and would go on existing for hundreds of years, dominating the lives of succeeding generations of Fitzhuberts who had at times gone as far as to fight and die for the survival of its Norman tower.

15 Mrs. Hume of the pragmatic + humorous characters

Next morning the solicitor's letter turned up exactly where Mike had expected – stuffed into the back of the little drawer in the spare room writing table. It was Sunday, and as Albert had a mysterious appointment concerning a horse on an outlying farm, he passed the greater part of the day in wandering aimlessly about the grounds. About midday the wreathing mists lifted to show a clear view of the pine forest against a pale blue sky. After lunch when the sun came out in fitful primrose gleams, he strolled down to the Lodge and was met with open arms by the Cutlers and regaled with hot scones and tea in the cosy kitchen. 'And how's Miss Irma? My, you wouldn't guess how we miss her about the place.' Mike confessed that he hadn't seen her while he was in town, but understood she was sailing for England on Tuesday, at which Mrs Cutler's face fell in genuine consternation. As soon as the visitor left, Mr Cutler, who like most people who live in close daily contact with nature was aware of elemental rhythms, said mildly, 'I always reckoned there was something between them two. Pity!'

His wife sighed, 'I couldn't believe my ears when he spoke so casual-like about my poor dear lamb.'

At twilight Mike had gone down to the lake where the dry rattle of the reeds and bare willow streamers dipping in and out of the little cove (in summer a shaded anchorage for the punt) filled him with a restless melancholy. The swans had disappeared, and the water lilies, whose dark green pads dotted the black sunless surface. The oak where he had seen the swan drinking at the clam shell on a summer afternoon was naked to the sky. In the distance he

could hear the little stream tumbling down from the forest under the rustic bridge. The tinkling music seemed to accentuate the stillness and silence of the interminable day.

As soon as he had finished his evening meal, he took the hurricane lamp that always hung in the side passage and made his way, in drizzling sleet, to the stable. There was a light in the window of Albert's room and the trapdoor propped open with a boot for the reception of the visitor. On the table a bottle of whisky and two glasses were set out. 'Sorry I can't make a fire up here - no chimney - but the grog keeps the cold out and Cook knocked us up a sandwich. Help yourself.' Mike thought there was an air of welcome, even of comfort, unknown in his Aunt's drawing-room. 'If you were a married man,' he said, settling down into the broken rocking chair, 'you would be what the women's magazines call a Home Maker.'

'I like a bit of comfort when I can get it - if that's what you mean.'

'Not only that...' Like so many things one would have liked to say it was too complicated to embark on. 'I'd like to see you in a place of your own some day.'

Oh, you would, would you? I'd soon be getting itchy feet, Mike, even if I had the dough to settle down and raise a pack of kids. How are you liking city life with the nobs?

'Not at all. My Aunt can think of nothing but giving one of her ghastly parties - for me. I haven't told them yet I'm going up North in a week or two - probably Queensland.

'Now there's a place I never really seen - except the Brisbane waterfront and the lock-up at Toowoomba - oh,

only for one night. I told you before, I was with a pretty rough mob in them days.

Mike glanced affectionately at the brick red features, more honest in the flickering candlelight than the faces of many of his Cambridge friends who let their tailors' bills run on for years and had never passed a night behind bars. 'Why not take a holiday and come up North with me?'

'Jeez. You mean that?'

'Of course I mean it.'

'Where would you be stopping?'

'There's a big cattle station I want to see - away up near the border. It's called Goonawingi.'

Albert said thoughtfully, 'I reckon I could easy get a job on one of them big runs. All the same, Mike, I can't walk out on your Uncle and the horses unless I got someone to suit him at Lake View. The old bastard's treated me pretty good, taking it all round.'

'I understand that,' Mike said. 'Anyway, start keeping your eyes skinned for the right bloke to take over and I'll write to you as soon as I know my plans.' Money was noticeably not mentioned. At this stage the offer of a train fare to Queensland would have been out of keeping with the dignity of a perfect understanding. The stuffy little room was almost cosy what with the whisky and the light of the two candles. Mike helped himself to another drink and felt the gentle glow running through his veins. 'When I was a child I always thought whisky was some kind of remedy for toothache. My Nannie used to dip cotton wool into the bottle. Lately I find a stiff whisky's quite a help when I can't sleep.'

dreams

'Still thinking about that bloody Rock?'
'I can't help it. It comes back at night. Dreams.'
'Talk about dreams!' Albert said. 'I had a bobbydazzler last night. Talk about real.'

'Tell me. I'm an expert on nightmares since I came to Australia.'

'Not exactly a nightmare this wasn't . . . Oh, Hell! I can't explain.'

'Go on. Try! Mine are so real sometimes I can't even be sure they are dreams.'

'I was bloody well dead asleep. Had a big Saturday. Must have been round midnight when I got to bed. Well, all of a sudden I'm as wide awake as I am this minute and there's such a stink of pansies in the room I opens my eyes to see where it's coming from. I never knew pansies has that much perfume. Sort of dainty but no mistaking it. Sounds bloody silly, don't it?'

'Not to me,' Mike said, his eyes fixed on his friend's face. 'Go on.'

'Well, I opens my eyes and the joint's as bright as day although it's as dark as hell outside. Never struck me as funny until I'm telling you now.' He paused and lit a Capstan cigarette. 'That's right. Like the gas was full on. And there she is standing at the end of the bed - exactly where you're sitting now.'

'Who was? Who was it?'

'Jeez, Mike! There's no call to get worked up over a bloody dream . . .' He pushed the bottle across the table. 'My kid sister. You remember - the one I told you about that was nuts on pansies? She seemed to be wearing some kind of

deep seated fears & desires coming up

nightgown. And that didn't strike me as funny either - not until now. Otherwise she looked about the same as when I seen her last . . . oh about six or seven years ago, I suppose. I forget now.'

'Did she say anything - or just stand there?'

'Mostly just stand there looking down at me and smiling. "Don't you know me, Bertie?" she says. And I says, "Of course I know you." "Oh, Bertie!" she says, "your poor arms with the mermaids and the way you was laying there with your mouth wide open and that broken tooth I would've known you anywhere!" I'm just sitting up to get a better look at her when she starts to sort of . . . what the Hell do you call it when a person starts to go all misty-like?'

dreams

'Transparent,' Mike said.

'That's right. How did you know? I calls out, "Hi! Sis! Don't go yet." But she's almost gone, all but her voice. I could hear it as plain as what I'm hearing you now. She says, "Good-bye, Bertie. I've come a long way to see you and now I must go." I sung out good-bye but she'd gone. Clean through that wall over there . . . you reckon I'm batty?'

Batty! If Albert's bullet-head so firmly screwed on to the squared shoulders wasn't to be relied on for glorious commonsense sanity, what was? If Albert was batty there was no sense in believing in anything. In hoping for anything. Or praying. No more sense in praying to the God Mike had been told to believe in ever since Nannie had dragged him to Sunday school in the village church. And there was God Himself in a red and blue glass window - a terrifying old man rather like his grandfather,

Albert USE

*Mike
backstory*

the Earl of Haddingham, sitting on a cloud and interfering with everyone down below. Punishing the wicked, caring for the sparrows fallen from their nests in the park, keeping an eye on the Royal Family in their various palaces, saving – or allowing to be shipwrecked according to whim – ‘Those In Peril On The Sea’ . . . Finding and Saving, or allowing to perish, the lost schoolgirls on the Hanging Rock. All of which and a good deal more flashed through poor Mike’s brain in a jumble of imagery impossible to digest – let alone communicate – as he sat staring at his friend, now grinning and repeating, ‘Batty! Just you wait till you have a dream like that!’ Mike rose, yawning, ‘Batty or not, you’ll do me, Albert. Think I’ll have another drink and turn in. Good night.’

Although the mist had cleared and the sun been up for some time when Mike was at breakfast next morning, daylight had not yet reached the gardens on the shady side of the Mount. From the dining-room window he looked out for the last time at the little lake, still in deep shadow, like a slab of cold grey stone. Mount Macedon robbed of its summer beauty might well be as bleak as the sodden Cambridge fields. He shivered as he picked up his valise, put on his overcoat and walked down to the stables. Albert, who was driving him down to the Melbourne train, was whistling through his teeth as he hosed down the bricks, with Toby standing ready in the dog-cart.

The cob was eager to be off, tossing its smartly hogged little head and jingling its shining bit. ‘Take your time, Mike. Little brute’s got a mouth like iron but I can hold him while you get in.’

They had just turned out of the avenue into the road when Albert jerked the lively cob to a standstill at sight of Manassa’s boy, wobbling along on his sister’s bicycle and bearing the morning’s mail in a hand mottled with cold. ‘This is Cook’s cough drops, Mr Crundall, will you take ‘em? Half a mo – there’s a letter here for you.’

‘What’s the joke? Nobody writes me no letters.’

‘I can read, can’t I? Your name’s Mr A. Crundall, ain’t it?’

‘Here then, hand it up and none of your cheek. Well I’ll be buggered. Who the hell can it be from?’ As no answer was expected or given the boy went wobbling off down a side lane in a huff and the drive proceeded in silence until they pulled up outside the Macedon station. There was a good ten minutes to spare before the arrival of the train, and Albert being on friendly terms with the stationmaster, they were invited to come in out of the cold and warm themselves at the fire in his office.

‘Aren’t you going to open your letter?’ Mike enquired.

‘Don’t mind me.’

‘Tell you the truth, I’m not too clever at making out this kind of fancy writing. Better on the print. How about you reading it out to me?’

‘Good Heavens, there might be something private.’ Albert grinned. ‘Not unless the cops are after me. Fire away.’ The Albert who had no inhibitions about the Toowoomba Lockup or having his private correspondence opened and read aloud continued to surprise and stimulate. At home the family letters laid out in orderly rows by the butler on a Boule table had an almost divine right of privacy. Feeling as if he

were about to rob a bank, Michael took the letter, opened it and began to read. 'It's written from the Galleface Hotel ...'

'Don't know the joint. Where is it?'

'At least it seems to have been written there and posted later, from Fremantle.'

'Cut the frills – just tell me what it's about and I'll nut it out again when I get home.'

It was a letter from Irma Leopold's father, thanking Mr Albert Crundall for his part in the finding and rescue of his daughter on the Hanging Rock. *I understand you are only a young fellow, and unmarried. My wife and I will be most happy if you will accept the enclosed cheque as a token of our everlasting gratitude. I understand from my solicitor that you are at present employed privately as a coachman ... if you have any wish to change your present employment at some future date, please do not hesitate to communicate with me at my Banker's address, below ...* 'Jeez!' Further comment, if any, was cut off by the roar of the Express coming into the station as Mike pushed the letter into Albert's seemingly frozen hand, picked up his valise and jumped into the nearest compartment just as the train pulled out of the platform. Five minutes later, Albert was still standing in front of the stationmaster's fire gazing at a cheque for one thousand pounds.

The hotels were not yet open in the township, but Mr Donovan of Donovan's Railway Hotel was presently awakened by insistent knocking that brought him, still in his pyjamas, to the side entrance of the closed and shuttered Bar. 'What the blazes ... oh, it's you Albert! Hell, we're not open for another hour.'

'I don't care if you're open or shut. A double brandy, as quick as you can get it. This bloody cob won't stand –' Mr Donovan, a good-natured soul accustomed to the demands of persons in desperate need of strong liquor before breakfast, opened up the bar, produced a bottle and glass and asked no questions.

Albert by this time was reduced to much the same state of mind and body as on the memorable occasion when he had been knocked out in the tenth round by the Castlemaine Wonder. He was heading for home and half way down Main Street when he caught sight of Irish Tom from the College, driving a hooded buggy on the opposite side of the road. Albert was in no mood to talk to Tom or anyone else and merely raised his whip in greeting. Tom, however, was pulling up at the kerb with such urgent nods and grimacings that he reluctantly reined in the cob. Whereupon Tom sprang from the buggy, threw the reins over the neck of the patient brown mare, and crossed the road to the dog-cart. 'Albert Crundall! I haven't clapped eyes on you since that Sunday on the Rock with the Johns. Seen this morning's paper?'

'Not yet. I don't go much on the papers – only for the racing.'

'Then you haven't heard the news?'

'Stone the crows! Don't tell me they've found the other two sheilas?'

'Oh, no,' nothing like that, poor young creatures! See here – on the front page – FIRE IN CITY HOTEL, BROTHER AND SISTER BURNED TO DEATH. Glory be! What an end. As I said to Minnie if it's not one thing it's another nowadays.'

Albert glanced hurriedly at the paragraph which revealed that the couple were on their way to Warragul and that Miss Dora Lumley's previous address was entered on the hotel register as 'Care of Appleyard College, Bendigo Road, Woodend'. Albert was sorry enough for anyone unlucky enough to be burned alive in their beds but at the moment he had other and more important matters on his mind. 'Well, I'll be off now. Toby don't like standing for long.' Tom, however, was disposed to linger by the wheel of the dog-cart for further conversation. 'That's a nice wee cut of a cob you got there, Albert.'

'Lively,' said the other. 'Mind your hand - he don't like his tail touched when he's in the dog-cart.'

'I don't blame him. There's one like that down at the College. By the way, you wouldn't be knowing anyone on the Mount would be wanting a married couple? Me and Minnie's getting married on Easter Monday. After that we'll be looking for a job.'

Still more or less stunned by the impact of Mr Leopold's letter, the coachman could hardly wait to get back to the privacy of his attic room to read it again, and was gathering up the reins when something about the word job rang a bell. Tom was rambling on: 'Minnie's Auntie wants us to give her a hand with a bit of a pub she owns at Point Lonsdale - did I tell you that's where we're going for our honeymoon? But I fancy something with horses meself, and Minnie - you don't know my Minnie - dainty as a fairy about a house though I say it - never seen the likes of her with the silver!'

'I'll keep my eyes skinned for you, Tom. It's on the cards I might know of something after Easter, but you never

know. Ta-ta.' And off he clattered round the turn into the Upper Macedon Road.

Thus was decided within less time than it took Tom to cross the road to the buggy, a future of blissful domesticity for himself and Minnie beyond their wildest dreams. Another segment of the Hanging Rock pattern was nearing completion, in this instance with a spectacular flourish embellished with unguessed-at future joys, including a comfortable cottage to be erected behind the stables at Lake View and later to be filled with merry-eyed infants the spit and image of Irish Tom. One of them subsequently became a strapper in a racing stables at Caulfield and achieved undying fame for himself and parents by coming in second in a field of twenty-seven in the Caulfield Cup. At which point we can no longer concern ourselves with the fortunes of Tom and his Minnie who, after all, are only minor threads in the pattern of the College Mystery, soon to take on a new and unpredictable turn in which they were fortunately not involved.

As soon as Albert had unharnessed Toby he sat down in the rocking chair and took out Mr Leopold's envelope which had been burning into his right hip the whole way home from the railway station. After laboriously deciphering the contents several times, he knew it by heart, address and all - a boon granted to the non-reading fraternity that accounts for their safe storage of any necessary factual information. The unlettered farmer who sows and reaps according to the seasons has no need of writing down the dates in a notebook. Thus Albert, who always knew to the day precisely when Toby's mane was last hogged and

Class Money USE

he doesn't just how this is!
revels

when the mare was shod in Woodend, carefully placing the Leopold cheque in a jam tin under his bed, had no further need to refer to the letter, and after burning it over a stump of candle sat down to think things over. Just as he himself by a few casual words this morning had effectively shaped the destinies of Tom and Minnie, so had Irma's father, in a moment of generous impulse, altered the entire course of Albert's life. It is probably just as well for our nervous equilibrium that such cataclysms of personal fortune are usually disguised as ordinary everyday occurrences, like the choice of boiled or poached eggs for breakfast. The young coachman settling down in the rocking chair after tea that Monday evening had no sense of having already embarked on a long and fateful journey of no return.

Albert felt he could do with a short holiday. He had always wanted to have a look at Queensland and now, surely, was his chance? It was a decision easily made and far less onerous than the necessity of writing at least three letters this very night, that involved the borrowing of Cook's writing pad and three envelopes, and unearthing a pen, thickly encrusted with stale purple ink. In spite of these minor drawbacks, he knew what he wanted to say to each of his three correspondents, which is not always the case with people who can spell a good deal better and write more legibly than Albert Crundall. Even so, the nib was licked clean before he had actually got going on letter number one which began smoothly enough with *Dear Mr Leopold Sir - You could of nocked me down with a fether when your letter and enclosed cheque receeved this morning (March 23).* After which it struck the writer that

Albert

apart from an occasional tip and the Colonel's sovereign at Christmas, he had never within his memory been given a present until today's magnificent gift. Except once, at the orphanage, when some well-meaning old hen had handed him a Bible. As it seemed necessary to say something more than a bare Thank You for a cheque of £1000 (Yes, there it was large as life in the jam tin) he decided on telling Mr Leopold how he had traded the Bible for five bob, in the hope of someday buying himself a pony. Well, sir, I was only a nipper and of course I never got same having to ern my living when I turned twelve so will start now looking round for somethink with a bit of blood - about fourteen hands. There is some reel good horses about if you have say thirty pound cash which I now have sir thanks to your jennerosity. The rest of the money can sit tite in the Bank till I have had a good think wot to do with it for the best. Well Mr Leopold sir I am still nocked sideways at your jenneros gift so will now close being near midnight. Again with grateful thanks and wishing yourself and family long and prosperus life.

Yours gratefully,
Albert Crundall.

There was still something to be added in a postscript that took nearly as long to compose and get written down as all the rest of the letter. *It was reely nothink wot I done for your dauter on the Rock. Anyone round here will tell you the same. It was my mate. A young chap by the name of Hon. Fitzhubert saved her life. Not me.* Albert Crundall.

ing?

Letter number two, to Colonel Fitzhubert, was much easier, giving the coachman's notice on a date suitable to both parties and recommending Tom from the College as a reel good man with the horses and ending up, *You was always a good boss to me. I appreciate same and if you want lancer's new saddle before the Spring is hanging on a nail in my room better kep dry this damp wether your faithfully Albert Crundall.*

The last letter, to Mike, was dashed off at breakneck speed with spelling thrown to the winds. Good old Mike knew he was no hand with a bloody pen. *Dear Mike. By Jeez that check is a bobbydazzler all rite.* The rest is of no special interest except perhaps the last sentence: *Well Mike meet me any day you say in the City do you know the Post Office Hotel in Burke Street? We could have a beer and fix a date for Q'land? I have wrote to your Unkle re turning in the job at Lake V. and all in order there so you name the day. Albert.*

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