

For the inmates of Appleyard College, Sunday the fifteenth of February was a day of nightmare indecision: half dream, half reality; alternating, according to temperament, between wildly rocketing hopes and sinking fears.

The Headmistress, after a night passed in staring at the wall of her bedroom interminably whitening to the new day, was on deck at her usual hour with not a hair of the pompadour out of place. Her first concern this morning was to ensure that nothing of yesterday's happenings should be so much as whispered beyond the College walls. The three wagonettes that ordinarily took the boarders and governesses to the various churches had been countermanded before Mr Hussey had taken his leave last night, churches in Mrs Appleyard's opinion being hot beds of gossip on a fine Sunday morning. Thank Heaven Ben Hussey was a sensible creature who could be trusted to keep his mouth

shut except for the confidential report already in the hands of the local police. At the College absolute silence until further notice was the rule. It may be fairly assumed that it was obeyed by those of the staff and pupils still on their legs and able to communicate after last night's ordeal, at least half of the picnickers being confined to their rooms with shock and exhaustion. However, we may have our suspicions that Tom and Minnie, as natural news-spreaders, and possibly Cook, all of whom had unofficial visitors during Sunday afternoon, were not quite so conscientious, and that Miss Dora Lumley may have exchanged a few words at the back door with Tommy Compton who delivered the Sunday cream. Doctor McKenzie of Woodend had been sent for and turned up in his gig soon after breakfast: an elderly G.P. of infinite wisdom who, taking in the situation with one shrewd gold-spectacled glance, prescribed a whole holiday on Monday, light nourishing food and some mild sedative. Mademoiselle was confined to her room with a migraine. The old doctor patted the pretty hand on the coverlet, sprinkled a few drops of eau de cologne on the patient's burning forehead and observed mildly, 'By the by, my dear young lady, I hope you're not so foolish as to blame yourself in any way for this unfortunate affair? It may very well turn out to be a storm in a tea-cup, you know.'

'Mon Dieu, Doctor - I pray that you are right.'

'Nobody,' said the old man, 'can be held responsible for the pranks of destiny.'

Edith Horton, for once in her life something of a heroine, was pronounced by Doctor McKenzie to be in good

*for shadowing
gym scene*

physical trim thanks to the prolonged fit of screaming – in a girl of her age Nature's answer to hysteria – although he was a little disturbed by her remembering nothing whatever of the thing that had sent her running back alone and terrified from the Rock. Edith liked Doctor McKenzie – who didn't? – and appeared to be trying, as far as her limited intelligence allowed, to co-operate. It was possible, he decided as he drove home, that the child hit her head on a rock – easily done in that rough country – and was suffering from a mild form of concussion.

Mrs Appleyard had spent the greater part of Sunday alone in her study, following a conversation with Constable Bumper of Woodend, who had brought with him a none too bright young policeman for the purpose of taking notes on a relatively unimportant matter which Bumper expected to be satisfactorily cleared up before Sunday evening. City people were forever getting themselves lost in the tall timber and getting Christians off their beds on Sunday mornings to find them. It appeared, however, that the facts concerning the three missing schoolgirls and their governess were more than ordinarily vague, apart from Ben Hussey's story which did no more than sum up events already known and confirmed. Bumper had arranged for the two young men picnicking at the Hanging Rock on Saturday – so far the last people to see the missing girls crossing the creek – to give the police any further information which might be required, if they had not already been found, on Monday. The only other person that Bumper would like to speak to this morning for a few minutes, if convenient, was the girl Edith Horton, who had actually been with three of

the missing persons, possibly for several hours, before she had returned panic-stricken to the luncheon camp. Accordingly, Edith, red eyed in a cashmere dressing gown to match, was brought down to the study only to prove an inarticulate and utterly useless source of information. Neither the Constable nor the Head could extract anything more constructive than a sniff or two and sulky negatives. Perhaps the young policeman might have done better but he was not given a chance and Edith was escorted back to bed. 'It doesn't signify,' said Bumper, accepting a glass of brandy and water. 'In my private opinion, Ma'am, the whole affair will be cleared up within a few hours. You've no idea how many people get themselves lost if they stray a few yards off the beaten track.'

'I wish, Mr Bumper,' said Mrs Appleyard, 'I could agree with you. My head girl, Miranda, was born and bred in the Bush... with regard to the governess, Miss McCraw...'

It had already been established that nobody had seen Miss McCraw leaving the picnic party after lunch. Although for some unknown reason she must have suddenly decided to get up from under the tree where she had been reading and followed the four girls towards the Rock. 'Unless,' said the policeman, 'the lady had some private arrangements of her own? To meet a friend or friends, for instance, outside the gates?'

'Definitely no. Miss Greta McCraw, whom I have employed for several years, to my knowledge has not a single friend, or acquaintance even, on this side of the world.'

Her book had already been found with her kid gloves exactly where she had been sitting, by Rosamund, one of the

senior girls. Both Mrs Appleyard and the policeman were agreed that a mathematics mistress, no matter how 'smart at figures' as Bumper put it, could be fool enough to lose her way like anyone else, although the point was rather more delicately made. Even Archimedes, it was suggested, might have taken a wrong turning with his thoughts on higher things. All this the young policeman took down with much hard breathing and pencil licking. (Later, when the passengers in the drag on its outward journey were briefly questioned, it would be recalled by several witnesses, including Mademoiselle, that Miss McCraw had been talking rather wildly of triangles and short cuts, and had even suggested to the driver that they should go home by a different and quite impractical route.)

A continuous search of the Picnic Grounds and as much of the Hanging Rock as could be clambered over and observed at close quarters, had already been set in motion by the local police. One of the most baffling features, as already reported by Mr Hussey, was the absence of any kind of tracks other than some crushed bracken and the bruised leaves of a few bushes on the lower slopes of the eastern face of the rock. On Monday, unless the mystery had been solved, a black tracker was being brought from Gippsland, and – at the instigation of Colonel Fitzhubert – a bloodhound, for whom certain articles of the missing persons' clothing were labelled by Miss Lumley and handed over at the constable's request. A number of locals, including Michael Fitzhubert and Albert Crundall, were already assisting the police in the careful toothcombing of the surrounding scrub. News travels as fast in the Australian Bush as it does in a city,

This is what Appleyard must control

and by Sunday evening there was hardly a house within fifty miles of Hanging Rock where Saturday's mysterious disappearance was not being discussed over the evening meal. As always, in matters of surpassing human interest, those who knew nothing whatever either at first or even second hand were the most emphatic in expressing their opinions, which are well known to have a way of turning into established facts overnight.

If Sunday the fifteenth had been a nightmare at the College, Monday the sixteenth was, if anything, worse; beginning with a ring at the hall door at six a.m. by a young reporter from a Melbourne newspaper on a flat-tyred bicycle, who had to be restored by Cook with breakfast in the kitchen and sent back newsless on the Melbourne Express. This unhappy youth was the first unwelcome caller of many, many more. The massive cedar door, rarely used except on ceremonial occasions, was opening and shutting from morning till night on a variety of callers, some well intentioned, others merely inquisitive, including a few male and female hyenas drawn quite frankly and openly by the smell of blood and scandal. None of these people were admitted. Even the curate from Macedon and his kind little wife, both dreadfully embarrassed, but imbued with a genuine desire to help in time of trouble, were dismissed like everyone else with a curt 'not at home' on the porch.

Meals were served with their customary clockwork precision, but only a few of the usually ravenous young women who sat down to the mid-day dinner did more than trifle with the roast mutton and apple pie. The seniors

gathered together in little whispering groups. Edith and Blanche sniffed and slouched arm in arm for once uncorrected; the New Zealand sisters endlessly embroidered, murmuring of remembered earthquakes and other horrors. Sara Waybourne, who had lain awake all Saturday night waiting for Miranda to return from the picnic and kiss her good night as she always did, no matter how late the hour, flitted restlessly from room to room like a little ghost until Miss Lumley, whose head was pounding like a sledge hammer, produced some linen to be hemmed before tea. Miss Lumley herself, and the junior sewing mistress, when not engaged in running messages for the Head and other unrewarding duties, complained to their mutual satisfaction of being 'put upon' – a handy phrase which covered everyone in authority from the Almighty down. The essay on the Hanging Rock, still chalked up on the blackboard as the major exercise in English Literature for Monday, February the sixteenth, at eleven thirty a.m., was never so much as mentioned again. At last the sun sank behind the glowing dahlia bed; the hydrangeas shone like sapphires in the dusk; the statues on the staircase held aloft their pallid torches to the warm blue night. So ended the second dreary day.

By the morning of Tuesday the seventeenth, the two young men who had been the last to see the missing girls on Saturday afternoon had dictated their respective statements to the local police. Albert Crundall at the Woodend Station, and the Hon. Michael Fitzhubert in his Uncle's study at Lake View. Both had affirmed their complete ignorance as to the subsequent movements of the four

girls after they had crossed the creek near the pool and walked away in the direction of the lower slopes of the Hanging Rock. Michael with faltering tones and down-cast eyes which seemed to have receded into his head since Sunday morning, when Albert had come galloping back from Manassa's store with the news of the girls' disappearance. Constable Bumphre had seated himself at the Colonel's writing table with Michael opposite stiff on a highbacked chair.

After the usual formalities were completed, 'I think, sir,' said the policeman, 'we had better start off with a few questions, just to get the general picture, so to speak.' Young Mr Fitzhubert, with his shy charming smile and English good manners, was obviously the uncommunicative type. 'Now then, when you saw the girls crossing the creek, did you recognize any of them?'

'How could I? I have only been in Australia about three weeks and haven't met any young girls.'

'I see. Did you have any conversation with any of these girls – either before or after they crossed to the opposite bank?'

'Certainly not! I've just told you, Constable, I didn't even know any of them by sight.' At which guileless reply the Constable permitted himself a dry grin, adding mentally, 'Stone the crows! With that face and all that money?' He asked, 'How about Crundall? Did he speak to any of these girls?'

'No. Only stared and whistled at them.'

'What were your Uncle and Aunt doing while this was going on?'

'As far as I can remember they were both dozing. We had champagne for lunch and I suppose it made them sleepy.'

'What effect does champagne have on you?' asked the policeman, pencil in air.

'None as far as I know. I don't drink much at any time and when I do it's usually wine, you know, at home.'

'Well then, you were perfectly clear in the head and sitting with a book under a tree when you saw them crossing the creek. Now suppose you go on from there. Just try and remember any little detail even if it seems unimportant now. You understand of course this is an entirely voluntary statement on your part?'

'I watched them crossing the creek . . .' He swallowed and went on again in an almost inaudible voice. 'They all did it differently.'

'Speak up, please. How do you mean differently? Ropes? Vaulting poles?'

'Heavens no! I only meant some of them were more agile, you know - more graceful.'

Bumper, however, was not at this moment concerned with grace. The young man continued: 'Anyway, as soon as we were out of earshot I got up and went over to speak to Albert who was washing some glasses at the creek. We had a bit of a talk - oh, perhaps ten minutes, and I said I would take a little stroll before it was time to go home.'

'What time was it then?'

'I didn't look at my watch but I knew my uncle wanted to leave not later than four o'clock. I began walking towards the Hanging Rock. By the time it began to go uphill there was some bracken fern and bushes and the girls were

already out of sight. I remember thinking the scrub looked pretty thick for girls to tackle in light summer dresses, and expected to see them coming down any minute. I sat down for a few minutes on a fallen tree. When Albert called out I came back to the pool immediately, mounted the Arab pony and rode home, most of the way behind my Uncle's waggonette. I can't think of anything else. Will that do?'

'Nicely, thank you, Mr Fitzhubert. We may get you to help us again later.' Michael groaned inwardly. The brief interview had been a fairly close imitation of a dentist's drill boing into a sensitive cavity. 'Only one more thing I'd like to check up on before we get it written down,' the policeman was saying. 'You mentioned seeing three girls crossing the creek. Is that correct?'

'I'm sorry. You're right of course, there were four girls.'

Bumper's pencil was hovering again. 'What made you forget there were four of 'em, do you think?'

'Because I forgot the little fat one, I suppose.'

'So you looked pretty closely at the other three, did you?'

'No I didn't.' (God help me it's the truth. I only looked at her.)

'I suppose you would have remembered if there was an elderly lady with them?'

Michael, looking irritated, said, 'Of course I would. There was no one else. Only the four girls.'

While this was going on Albert at the Woodend police station was giving his statement to one Jim Grant - the young policeman who had been out to Appleyard College with Bumper on Sunday morning. Unlike Michael, Albert, fairly well used to the twists and turns which a policeman

can give to the most innocent remark, was rather enjoying himself, being officially acquainted with young Grant through the trifling matter of a Sunday cockfight.

'I've told you, Jim,' he was saying, 'I only seen them sheilas the once.'

'I'll trouble you not to call me Jim when I'm on duty,' said the other, who had reached the perspiring stage of exasperation. 'It don't smell good in the Force. Now then. How many girls did you see crossing that creek?'

'All right Mr Bloody Grant. Four.'

'There's no call for swearing neither. Im only performing my duty.'

'I suppose you know,' said the coachman, producing a small bag of caramels and ostentatiously sucking one in a hollow tooth, 'that this is a statement what I give to the police free, gratis, and for nothing. I'm only doing it to oblige and don't you forget it, Mr Grant.'

Jim resisted the peace offering of a caramel and continued. 'What did you do after Mr Fitzhubert started to walk towards the Rock?'

'The Colonel wakes up and starts holleing it's time to go home and I goes after Mr Michael and blow me if he isn't sitting down on a log and the sheilas out of sight.'

'About how far from the pool would this log be?'

'Look, Jim, you know as well as I do. The bloody police and everyone else know the exact spot. I showed it to Mr Bumper himself last Sunday.'

'All right, I'm only ascertaining the facts - go on.'

'Anyway, Michael gets on that Arab pony what his Uncle lets him ride and rides home to Lake View.'

'The little beaut! I'll say some people are lucky! Gee, Albert, you couldn't get the Hon. Who's This to give me a loan of it to show at Gisborne? Nothing to beat that pony for fifty miles round here. Mind you, I wouldn't be wanting the saddle and bridle . . . just the mount for the afternoon. The Colonel knows I haven't bad hands on a horse.'

'If you think I've come all the way down here from Lake View to scrounge a ride on the Arab for you . . . ' said Albert, rising. 'No more questions? Then I'll be off. Ta-ta.'

'Hi, wait a moment. There is one more,' cried Jim, making a pass at the other's coat tails. 'When Mr Fitzhubert mounted this pony of his you say he rode home to Lake View with the wagonette? Did you actually see him all the way?'

'I haven't got eyes in the back of me bloody head. He rode behind us some of the way so as we wouldn't get his dust and some of the way he was ahead, according to the road. I didn't take that much notice except that we all arrived at the front gates of Lake View at the same time.'

'What time was that, do you think?'

'Round about half past seven it must have been. I remember Cook had my dinner waiting in the oven.'

'Thank you, Mr Crundall.' The young policeman closed his notebook with some formality. 'This interview will be written out in full and shown to you later for your approval. You may go now.' The permission was superfluous. Albert was already slipping the bridle over the head of a strawberry cob tethered in a patch of clover on the opposite side of the road.

For three consecutive mornings the Australian public had been devouring, along with its bacon and eggs, the

luscious details of the College Mystery as it was now known to the Press. Although no further information had been unearthed and nothing resembling a clue, so that the situation remained unchanged since the girls and their governess had been reported missing by Ben Hussey late on Saturday night, the public must be fed. To this end, some additional spice had been added to Wednesday's columns' photographs of the Hon. Michael's ancestral home, Haddingham Hall (inset of sisters playing with spaniel on the terrace) and of course Irma Leopold's beauty and reputed millions on coming of age. Bumpher, however, was far from satisfied with all this. After consultation with his friend, Detective Lugg, based at Russell Street, he had decided to make yet another attempt to extract something in the way of concrete evidence from the schoolgirl Edith Horton. Accordingly, at eight o'clock on the morning of Wednesday the eighteenth, another glorious day lightened by a gay little breeze, he had arrived at Appleyard College in a buggy and pair, with young Jim in attendance, for the purpose of driving Edith Horton and the French Governess to the Picnic Grounds at Hanging Rock.

Mrs Appleyard, although the arrangement smacked vaguely of frivolity, could hardly object. The police, said Bumpher, were doing their utmost to clear up the mystery and in his opinion and that of Detective Lugg, it was essential that Edith as a key witness should be confronted with the actual scene as a spur to memory. The Headmistress, aware of Edith's limited intelligence and unlimited obstinacy, plus a possible mild concussion, thought the expedition a waste of time and said so to

Bumpher, who bluntly disagreed. Despite a rather unprepossessing manner, Bumpher was no fool at his job and had a great deal of experience in the way different people react under police questioning. He told her: 'All of us trying to make this girl remember may have got her more bamboozled than ever. I've known people with shocking memories turn into quite useful witnesses once they get back to where they started, so to speak. We'll try and take it easy this time . . . ?' And so, with a relaxing atmosphere in mind, the Constable had allowed himself to enjoy the drive with Mademoiselle sitting up beside him smart and pretty in a shady hat, and had even shouted her a brandy and soda and Edith and young Jim a lemonade, while they were changing horses at the hotel in Woodend.

Now they were standing at the exact spot on the Picnic Grounds where Edith and the three other girls had crossed the creek by the pool on the afternoon of Saint Valentine's Day. Straight ahead, on the sunlit face of the Hanging Rock, the forest branches threw faintly stirring patterns of shade. 'Like blue lace,' thought Mademoiselle, wondering how anything so beautiful could be the instrument of evil . . . 'Now then, Miss Edith!' The policeman was well away, all smiles and fatherly patience. 'In which direction do you say you began walking the other day when you started off from this very spot?'

'I don't say. I told you before, one gum tree's the same as another to me.'

'Edith chérie,' put in Mademoiselle, 'perhaps you could tell the Sergeant what you four girls were chattering of just then . . . ? I am sure they *were* chattering, Mr Bumpher . . .'

'That's right,' said the policeman. 'That's the idea. Miss Edith, did anyone suggest which way they wanted to go?'

'Marion Quade was teasing me . . . Marion can be very disagreeable sometimes. She said those peaky things up there were a million years old.'

'The Peaks. So you were walking towards the Peaks?'

'I suppose so. My feet were hurting and I didn't pay much attention. I wanted to sit down on a fallen tree instead of going on but the others wouldn't let me.'

Bumper threw a hopeful glance at Mademoiselle. There were a number of logs and fallen branches scattered about but at least a fallen tree was something concrete to work from. 'Now that you've remembered about the log, Miss Edith, perhaps you will think of something else? Just take a look around from here and see if there's anything at all that you can recognize. Stumps, ferns, queer-shaped stones . . .?'

'No,' said Edith. 'There isn't.'

'Oh, well, never mind,' said the policeman, resolving to renew the attack after lunch. 'Where would you like to eat our sandwiches, Mademoiselle?'

Jim was sent back to the buggy for the lunch boxes and they had just made themselves comfortable on the grass when Edith volunteered, apropos of nothing, 'Mr Bumper! There is one thing I seem to remember.'

'Fine. What was it?'

'A cloud. A funny sort of cloud.'

'A cloud? Fine! Except that clouds unfortunately have a way of moving from one place to another in the sky, you know.'

'I am quite aware of that,' said Edith all at once prim and grown up. 'Only this one was a nasty red colour and I remember it because I looked up and saw it through some branches . . .' Slowly she took a large bite of ham sandwich . . . 'It was just after I passed Miss McCraw.'

Bumper's own sandwich fell unnoticed on to the grass. 'Miss McCraw? Stone the crows! You never told us you saw Miss McCraw! Jim, get your notebook. I don't know if you realize, Miss Edith, that what you have just told me is very important.'

'That's why I'm telling you,' said Edith smugly.

'When did your teacher join up with you and the other three girls? Think very hard please.'

'She's not my teacher,' said Edith, taking another bite of the sandwich. 'My mamma didn't want me to do senior mathematics. She says a girl's place is in the home.'

Bumper had somehow produced an ingratiating grin.

'Quite so. Very sensible lady, your mother . . . now go on please, about Miss McCraw. Where was she when you suddenly looked up and saw her? Close by? A long way off?'

'She seemed to be quite a long way off.'

'A hundred yards, fifty yards?'

'I don't know, I'm not much good at sums. I told you, I only saw her in the distance through the trees as I was running back to the creek.'

'You were running downhill, of course?'

'Of course.'

'And Miss McCraw was walking uphill, in the opposite direction. Is that correct?'

To his dismay the witness had begun to wriggle and giggle. 'Oh mercy! She did look so funny.'

'Why?' asked Bumph. 'Get this down, Jim. Why did she look so funny?'

'I'd rather not say.'

'Please tell us, Edith,' Mademoiselle coaxed. 'You're giving Mr Bumph such valuable help.'

'Her skirt,' said Edith, stuffing the corner of her handkerchief into her mouth.

'What about her skirt?'

Edith was giggling again. 'It's too rude to say out loud in mixed company.' Bumph was leaning towards her as if his keen blue eyes could bore a hole in her brain tissues. 'You don't need to mind about me. I'm old enough to be your Dad! . . . that's the idea.' Edith was whispering something into Mademoiselle's attentive little pink ear. 'She says, Constable, that Miss McCraw was not wearing a skirt - only les pantalons.'

'Drawers,' the constable instructed young Jim. 'Now then, Miss Edith. You are positive this woman you saw in the distance walking uphill through the trees was really Miss McCraw?'

'Positive.'

'Wasn't it a bit hard to recognize her without her dress?'

'Not at all. None of the other teachers are such a peculiar shape. Irma Leopold once told me "The McCraw is exactly the same shape as a flat iron!"'

And that was the last and only piece of factual information to be extracted from Edith Horton, either on Wednesday, February the eighteenth, or on any subsequent occasion.

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As soon as the police buggy had turned out of the drive on to the highroad, Mrs Appleyard had sat down resolutely at her desk and locked the study door. It was becoming a habit. As she went about her business, erect, uncommunicative, outwardly unperturbed, she was increasingly aware of a rising murmur of questioning voices from the outside world. Voices of cranks, clergymen, clairvoyants, journalists, friends, relations, parents. Parents of course were the worst. One could hardly toss their letters into the wastepaper basket as one could the offer, with stamped envelope enclosed, to find the missing girls with a patent magnet. A hard core of commonsense told her that it was reasonable enough, even for a parent whose daughter had returned from the picnic safe and well, to write for further information and reassurance. These were the letters that kept her chained and chafing at her desk for hours at a time. An indiscreet word addressed to an overwrought mother might easily at this stage set off a conflagration of lies and rumours that no amount of hosing down with the icy waters of truth could extinguish.

Mrs Appleyard's task this morning was the odious and infinitely more dangerous one of writing to inform the parents of Miranda and Irma Leopold and the legal guardian of Marion Quade that all three girls and a governess had mysteriously disappeared from the Hanging Rock. Fortunately - or perhaps unfortunately - none of the three letters would reach their destination without considerable delay. Nor would any of the recipients have had access to the published reports of the College Mystery, for reasons to be presently disclosed. Again her thoughts reverted

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to the morning of the picnic. Again she saw the orderly rows of girls in hats and gloves, the two mistresses in perfect control. Again she heard her own brief words of farewell on the porch, warning of dangerous snakes and insects. Insects! What in the name of Heaven had happened on Saturday afternoon? And why, why, why had it happened to three senior girls so valuable to the prestige and social standing of Appleyard College? Marion Quade, a brilliant scholar, though not wealthy like the other two, could be counted on for academic laurels, almost equally important in their way. Why couldn't it have been Edith who had disappeared, or that little nobody Blanche, or Sara Waybourne? As usual, the very thought of Sara Waybourne was an irritant. Those great saucer eyes, holding a perpetual unspoken criticism intolerable in a child of thirteen. However, Sara's fees were always promptly paid by an elderly guardian whose private address was never divulged. Discreet, elegant, 'Obviously a gentleman,' as her Arthur would have put it.

The memory of Arthur standing at her elbow as he often did while she struggled with a difficult piece of correspondence wiped the elegant guardian from her mind. All this was getting her nowhere. With something like a groan she took up a thin steel-nibbed pen and began to write. First to the Leopolds, undoubtedly the most impressive parents on the College register: fabulously rich and moving in the best international society, but now in India where Mr Leopold was buying polo ponies from a Rajah in Bengal. According to Irma's last letter, her parents would at this moment be somewhere in the Himalayas, on a frantic expedition with elephants and palanquins and silk

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embroidered tents, address, for at least a fortnight, unknown. At last the letter was completed to the writer's satisfaction – a judicious blend of sympathy and practical commonsense. Not too much sympathy in case by the time it was received the whole damnable business had been satisfactorily cleared up and Irma back at school. A problem, too, whether or not to touch on the black tracker and the bloodhound . . . She could almost hear Arthur's 'Masterly, my dear, masterly.' And so, according to its purpose, we may be sure it was.

Next in order of precedence came Miranda's mother and father, owners of vast cattle stations in the backblocks of Northern Queensland. Not quite in the millionaire class but entrenched in a setting of solid wealth and well-being as members of one of Australia's best known pioneer families. ✓✓✓
Exemplary parents who could be relied on not to fuss over trifles of missed trains or an epidemic of measles at the College; but in this preposterous situation as unpredictable as anyone else. Miranda was the only girl, the eldest of five children, and, well Mrs Appleyard knew it, the apple of her parents' eyes. The whole family had been staying at St Kilda during the Christmas holidays, but had returned last month to the luxurious isolation of Goonawingi. Only a few days ago Miranda had happened to mention that the Goonawingi mail arrived with the stores, sometimes only once in four or five weeks. However, one could never be sure, thought the Headmistress, sucking on the nib, that some busybody of a visitor wouldn't come riding over with the newspapers and let the cat out of the mail bag. As will have been noted Mrs Appleyard was not prone to

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sentiment, yet this was the hardest letter she had ever been obliged to write in her whole life. As she gummed down the flap of the envelope the closely written pages proclaimed themselves the messengers of doom. She shrugged: 'I am becoming fanciful', and took a nip or two of brandy from the cupboard behind the desk.

Marion Quade's lawful guardian was a family solicitor, very much in the background except for the payment of Marion's fees. By good fortune he was at present in New Zealand, on a fishing trip at some inaccessible lake. In Mrs Appleyard's hearing, her guardian had lately been referred to by Marion as a 'dodderer'. With the fervent hope that the solicitor would live up to his reputation and let sleeping dogs lie until further information came to hand, the letter was signed and sealed. And finally, another to the octogenarian father of Greta McCraw, living alone with his dog and his Bible on a remote island in the Hebrides. The old man was unlikely to make trouble or even communicate, having never penned his daughter a line since her arrival in Australia as a girl of eighteen. All four letters were stamped and laid on the hall table for Tom to post on tonight's train.