

✓ 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.

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On the afternoon of Thursday, February the nineteenth, Michael Fitzhubert and Albert Crundall were seated in amicable silence before a bottle of Ballarat Bitter in the little rustic boathouse fronting Colonel Fitzhubert's ornamental lake. Albert was off duty for an hour or two and Mike was taking a temporary respite from assisting at his aunt's annual garden party. The Lake was deep and dark, icy cold despite the languorous summer heat, overgrown at one end with waterlilies whose creamy cups caught and held the rays of the late afternoon sun. On a patch of lily pads a single white swan was standing on one coral leg, now and then sending out showers of concentric ripples across the surface of the lake. On the opposite side, banks of tree-ferns and blue hydrangea mingled with the natural forest rising steeply behind the low verandahed house on whose lawns the guests were strolling under the elms and oaks.



Two maids behind a trestle table were serving strawberries and cream: it was rather a smart party, including guests from nearby Government Cottage, the summer residence of the State Governor, with a hired footman, three musicians from Melbourne and plenty of French champagne. There had earlier been talk of putting the coachman into a tight black jacket for service at the champagne bar to which Albert had replied that he was hired to look after the horses. 'As I said to your Uncle, "I'm a coachman, sir, not a bloody waiter".'

Mike laughed. 'You look like a sailor, with those mermaids and things tattooed all over your arms.'

'A sailor done them for me, in Sydney. Wanted to do me chest, too, but I ran out of cash. Pity. I was only fifteen...'

Transported to a world where boys of fifteen cheerfully spent their last shilling on being thus disfigured for life, Mike gazed at his friend with something like awe. He himself at fifteen had been hardly more than a child with a shilling a week pocket money and another for 'the plate' on Sunday mornings... Since the afternoon of the picnic a comfortable non-demanding friendship had developed between the two young men. To see them now - Albert loose of limb in rolled-up shirt sleeves and moleskin trousers. Michael stiff in garden party attire with a carnation in his buttonhole - they looked an ill-assorted pair. 'Mike's all right,' Albert had told his friend the cook. 'Him and me are mates.' And so in the finest sense of that much abused word, they were. The fact that Albert, who had just tried his friend's grey topper on his own tousled buller head, looked like a music hall turn; and that Mike in Albert's wide brimmed greasy sundowner

## Albert + Michael's friendship

might have stepped from the pages of The Magnet or the Boys Own Paper, meant less than nothing. As did the accident of birth that had rendered one of them almost illiterate, and the other barely articulate, at the age of twenty - a Public School education being by no means a guarantee of adult expression. In each other's presence, neither young man was conscious of his shortcomings, if such they were.

There was a cosy sense of mutual understanding, and not too much talk. Topics of conversation were mainly of local interest, when they arose; the mare's off hind leg which Albert was painting with Stockholm tar, or the Colonel's obstinate enthusiasm for the time-wasting rose garden that called for more bloody weeding than an acre of spuds and anyway what was the good of all them roses? Neither had anything much in the way of embarrassing political, or for that matter any other kind of convictions, which they would have recognized as their own if shown them written down in cold print. Which in friendship makes everything simpler. There was no obstructive nonsense, for instance, in Mike's father being a Conservative member of the English House of Lords, while Albert's, when last heard of, was an itinerant rouse-about, in perpetual strife with the Boss of the Shed. For Albert, young Fitzhubert was the ideal companion, sitting silently for hours on an upturned chaff box in the stable yard, drinking in the other's native wisdom and wit. Some of Albert's more hair-raising anecdotes were true, others not. It made no odds. For Mike, the coachman's free-roving conversation was a continual source of pleasurable instruction, not only about life in general but Australia. In the Lake View kitchen,

prismatic



the Honorable Michael, a member of one of the oldest and richest families in the United Kingdom, was commonly referred to as 'that poor English bastard': an expression of genuine compassion for one who obviously had so much to learn. 'Cripes,' said Cook, whose wages were considered good at twenty-five shillings a week, 'I wouldn't be him, not for a cartload of nuggets.' Meanwhile, in the drawing-room Mike was telling his Uncle and Aunt, 'Albert's such a jolly good chap. And so clever. I can't tell you what a lot he knows about all sorts of things.'

'Hmm. I don't doubt it,' the Colonel agreed with a wink. 'Rough as bags, young Crundall, but no fool and a first-rate man with the horses.' His wife sniffed, almost breathing in the hay and horse dung. 'I can't imagine that Crundall's conversation would be exactly edifying.'

In the cool peace of the boathouse this afternoon there was precious little conversation, edifying or otherwise, what with the bottle of cold beer and the lake to look out upon, placid under its pattern of slowly lengthening shadows. In the distance 'The Blue Danube' drifted over the water from the rose garden as the party grew ever duller and cooler. The roses, admired to excess, were no longer conversationally adequate. The Colonel, with two or three chosen males, had retreated under the weeping elm armed with tumblers of Scotch and soda, while Mrs Fitzhubert held the rest of the party together as best she could on lemonade.

'Confound it - it's gone five already.' Michael was reluctantly unwinding his long legs under the table. 'I promised my Aunt I'd show Miss Stack the rose garden before they go.'

'Stack? That the one with a pair of legs on her like champagne bottles?'

Mike had no idea, the unknown Miss Stack's legs being of no moment whatsoever.

'I seen her getting out of the Government Cottage dog-cart this afternoon. Jeez, that reminds me - the groom was telling me the cops had the bloodhounds out at Hanging Rock again today.'

'Good God!' exclaimed the other sitting down again. 'What for? Have they found anything new?'

'No bloody fear! What I say is this: if them Russell Street blokes and the abo tracker and the bloody dog can't find 'em, what's the sense of you and me worrying our guts out? (We may as well finish the bottle.) Plenty of other people have got themselves bushed before today and as far as I'm concerned that's the stone end of it.'

Mike was staring out at the shining disc of the lake. He said slowly: 'As far as I'm concerned, it's not the end of it. I wake up in a cold sweat every night wondering if they're still alive dying of thirst somewhere on that infernal Rock at this very minute . . . while you and I are sitting here drinking cold beer.' If Michael's young sisters had heard the low impassioned voice, so different to his usual clipped and breezy utterance, they would hardly have recognized the brother whose confidences at home, if any, were reserved for an elderly cocker spaniel.

'That's where you and me is different,' Albert was saying. 'If you take my advice, the sooner you forget the whole thing the better.'

'I can't forget it, I never will.'



The white swan, poised all this time on the lily pads, now chose to stretch one pink leg and then the other and go flapping away across the lake towards the opposite bank. The two young men watched its flight in silence until it disappeared amongst the reeds.

'Ah, they're pretty birds all right, them swans,' Albert breathed. 'Beautiful,' Mike said, miserably aware of the strange young woman awaiting him in the rose garden. Painfully he unwound his long pin-striped legs from under the rustic seat, stood up, blew his nose, lit a cigarette, got as far as the door of the boathouse, stopped and turned round again.

'Listen,' Albert said. 'I'm no great shakes on music but isn't that "God Save the Queen"? The Gov. must be leaving.'

'I don't care if he is . . . there's something I must say to you but I don't know how to begin.' Albert had never seen him look so serious. 'As a matter of fact . . . I've been working out a plan -'

'It'll keep,' Albert said, lighting a cigarette. 'Better hop it, hadn't you? Your Auntie'll raise Hell if you're not on show.'

'Confound my Aunt. The point is, it *won't* keep. It's now or never to be any use. You know that bridle track you were telling me about yesterday?'

Albert nodded. 'You mean the one takes you down to the plains on our side of the Mount?'

'I daresay it sounds a wild goose chase to you and maybe it is but I don't care. I've decided to make a search of the Rock on my own, in my own way. No police. No blood-hounds. Just you and me. That is if you'll come along and

show me the ropes. We could take the Arab and Lancer, get off to an early start, and be home here for dinner without any awkward questions. Now then - I've got it off my chest. How about it?'

'Barmy. Nuts. You run along and show Miss Bottle Legs them roses and you and me have a yarn about it some other time.'

'Oh, I know what you're thinking,' said the other with such bitterness that Albert was quite shaken.

'Hi, wait a bit, Mike! I was only meaning -'

'You're thinking: poor bastard's a new chum in the Bush and so on. Hell, I know all that but it doesn't matter. I lied to you just now about a plan. It's really not so much a plan as a feeling.' Albert's eyebrows flew up but he said nothing. 'All my life I've been doing things because other people said they were the right things to do. This time I'm going to do something because I say so - even if you and everyone else thinks I'm mad.'

'It's like this,' Albert said, 'feelings is all very well but every inch of that bloody Rock has been gone over with a tooth-comb. What the Hell do you think you can do?'

'Then I'll be going alone,' Mike said.

'Who says you're going alone. We're mates, aren't we?'

'Then you will?'

'Of course I will, you big dope - Aw, cut it out. It won't take much fixing. We don't want nothing but a bit of tucker for you and me and a feed for the two horses. When do you reckon we go?'

'Tomorrow if you can get away.'



Lueta of Landocape VII

*Sucta magnet*

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loose rock. 'Beats me what the old girl could have done with it! Considering hundreds of people have been traipsing about in the scrub ever since Sunday last. Let alone the dog.'

Meanwhile, like most other dwellers on the Mount this evening, Colonel Fitzhubert and his nephew were discussing the recall of the bloodhound. Mrs Fitzhubert, worn out with the rigours of hospitality, had retired to bed. The Colonel was bitterly disappointed about the bloodhound. He had pinned his faith on it from the beginning and felt almost personally let down by its failure to come up with a clue. 'Pon my word,' he remarked to his nephew over the dinner table, 'I'm beginning to think this thing's gone too far for dogs or anything else. Be a week this coming Saturday since those poor girls disappeared. Have a glass of port? Most likely dead as mutton by now at the bottom of one of those infernal precipices.' The old boy appeared so genuinely concerned that Mike was tempted to confide his plans for tomorrow's expedition to the Hanging Rock. Aunt, however, would be sure to raise a thousand objections. After fiddling in silence with the walnuts he asked if he could have the Arab for the day on Friday? 'It's Albert's day off, you know, and he says he wants to take me for a fairly long ride.'

'By all means. Where do you think of going?'

Always a half-hearted liar, even in trifles, Mike muttered something about the Camel's Hump. 'Splendid! Crundall knows this country like the back of his hand. He'll see you get some good soft going for a gallop. If it wasn't for my Rose Show Committee tomorrow afternoon I might have joined you myself.' (God bless the Rose Show!)

'And don't be late for dinner,' the Colonel added. 'You know how your Aunt fusses.' Mike did know and promised faithfully to be back at Lake View by seven at least.

'Which reminds me,' said his Uncle, 'you and I are expected for lunch and tennis at Government Cottage on Saturday.'

'Lunch and tennis,' the nephew repeated, wondering inwardly how long it would take himself and Albert to get as far as the pool at the Picnic Grounds.

'Have a peach, my boy? Or some of this infernal jelly stuff? Women have no idea of household organization.'

Mike, who had been wandering on the Rock under the moon, was jerked back to the concrete reality of the lamplit dining table. 'It's the same thing every summer . . . on the night of your Aunt's garden party . . . these confounded leftovers - scraps of cold turkey . . . jelly . . . masquerading as dinner. High Tea more like . . . Now when we used to go camping at Bombala, I made it my personal responsibility to arrange for the servants to -'

'If you'll excuse me, Uncle,' said Mike, rising, 'I think I'll turn in without waiting for coffee. We're making an early start in the morning.'

'All right, my boy - enjoy yourself. Better ask cook to fix you an early breakfast. Nothing like bacon and eggs before a gallop. Good night!'

'Good night, sir.' . . . Eggs. Porridge . . . according to Albert there wasn't even fresh water on the Hanging Rock.