If Everyone Cared

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET TUCKER M.B.E.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my mother, Theresa Clements, who gave me a grounding in what is right as distinct from what is wrong. Many of the old people had this. I am grateful too for the practical training given by the white pioneers of the Murray-Murrumbidgee area towards the end of the last century and early this one. My mother's stories of those days have helped me to appreciate this wonderful country of ours, a God given land that I hope many nationalities can share.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Of the many wonderful friends who have helped and encouraged me I would like to make special mention of the following people: Mr Dennis Mayor, who travelled to the different places where I have lived and whose photographs of these places appear in this book; Miss Jean Hughes, who tirelessly typed the manuscript and assisted in many other ways; Dr Anne Ross, who willingly drove me hundreds of miles to the places of my childhood; both she and Miss Hughes have been long-standing friends at whose homes I have always been welcome; Dr John Cumpston and Miss Sylvia Cust, who assisted with research for the book, as well as providing constant encouragement; and Mr and Mrs Kim Beazley, whose friendship and support have been a source of great joy to me.

I should also like to thank the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council for making both the writing and publication of this book possible, and the National Library in Canberra for making available its fine collection of early prints and photographs.

FOREWORD

Mrs Margaret Tucker's story—the story of herself, the Aboriginal Lilardia—is the story of the attainment of a dignity beyond oppression, misrepresentation, flattery, the desire for approval, and beyond malice. Lilardia believes literally in the text: 'Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts,' and in the ascent of humanity through contact with that Spirit. Nobody can make her hate them, and she has, without sentimentality, the spirit that refuses to hate when people are hateful.

In Australia our faith tends to be in organisation, in resources, in power, and in the incentive of self-gratification. Lilardia believes however that Aboriginal people should be seeking deeper motives than those required to achieve the aims generally accepted by the Australian community.

The essence of Aboriginal thought has always been transcendental, and all Aboriginal ritual seeks identification with the creative force in the universe. To Lilardia this creative force is the Holy Spirit; He is also the Person of the Dream Time, and all other times, to Whom the Aboriginal people are consciously or unconsciously tending. She believes that the Spirit's counsel and companionship are available here and now; that is her discovery and that is the basis of the philosophy expressed in this book.

Kim E. Beazley

CHAPTER ONE

TWO FRIENDS RECENTLY TOOK ME to visit Deniliquin and Moonahculla, scene of my childhood days. We stayed in a motel on the banks of the Edwards River, which is very wide at that point. It seems silly to say, but my heart filled with gladness. It is so beautiful. My friends loved it too. We were given a room in that motel where one could see the old river as one lay in bed. On those same banks my mother had camped as a child.

We went on to visit Old Morago homestead, where Mother had worked when I was small and where we had played with the boss's children, with no division between us because of our colour. Nor was there any when I visited on this occasion. There was the old mulberry tree we had climbed, our mouths stained with the mulberry juice when the berries were ripe; the orange trees and the

dear old homestead over one hundred years old now. I remembered one of the young sons falling from the mulberry tree and breaking his arm. He was rushed to Deniliquin hospital. He did not want anyone to go with him or hold him except my mother.

After having a cup of tea with the daughters, who are about my age, and talking over old times, we crossed the bridge since built across the Edwards River to the place where Moonahculla once stood: now just a few fences and pieces of rotting timber remain. Through an old gate was the cemetery, most of the graves quite neatly marked with wooden crosses, some with wreaths of artificial flowers. I looked at the names on the crosses, but could not find those I had remembered being buried when I was a girl. So I asked the friend who had come with us from her home in Deniliquin. She pointed to an old pepper tree where cattle were grazing among the tall grass.

My heart ached as I realised those dear people's graves were unseen and their names forgotten, the *Rest in Peace* crosses long since rotted away. It is sixty years since those days.

As I remember that cemetery at old Moonahculla, where I first went to school in the bough shed, and the other at Cummeragunga, I feel that soon our ancestors won't even be a memory. Grand old warriors are buried there, the original pioneers of this country Australia.

As the tears rolled down my cheeks, I remembered my old mother, the last remaining of her tribe the Ulupna, of the Murray River district. Like a number of our dear old people, she was called Yarmuk, meaning Mother or Auntie. As I gazed at the place where they slept underground, I felt they at least are at peace, and I fancied I could hear my mother's voice saying as she used to, 'Stop feeling sorry and miserable for the bygone days,

be up and doing something worth while.' Many of our old people thought that way too, but wondered how and which way to begin.

Moonahculla was an Australian Inland Mission Settlement or Reserve, and it was here that I was brought up, in a mud-brick hut partitioned off to make sleeping quarters. A bark roof, lined inside with hessian, the walls papered with old newspapers, which were a never-ending source of interest to children and parents alike, especially the pictures, as we had no books to look at or toys to play with, nothing to interest a black community! The hut was a haven for mice and rats, unless we were lucky enough to have a cat, which would be loved by all the children on our bush Settlement. Such was our shelter from the elements and the white man's world.

Although our huts were small, with earthen floors, they were kept clean. There were about four or five weatherboard homes, built by the government, with no lining inside. They were hot in summer and cold in winter. Beds were made out of four posts, two long and two short. The long posts were stuck into the ground strongly and hessian was sewn onto the poles with twine or anything else available. Clean hessian was filled with dry grass or soft leaves from bushes that grew around. Yes, our people were getting soft, learning the white man's comfort, and why not?

The Settlement comprised about fourteen families, most of them large, but these were added to at times by other families, and families who came to stay with them. They all lived crowded together, until a working bee would build another little mud-brick hut, or even a hut made of hessian. The latter would not last long in rainy weather, and there was also the danger of fire, as there would be a large chimney that threw out much heat in the winter. Wonders were worked with old-fashioned

three-legged ovens: tarts, cakes, a roast, would miraculously come to light.

Our old aunt and uncle cared for us mostly, while Mother worked. Most times there were three or four other children living with us, who we looked on as brothers and sisters, sharing our food. It didn't matter how much or how little food there was, it would always stretch to provide for one more.

Sometimes a white swaggie would be passing what was known as the 'Blacks' Camp', and as our hut was the first one they would most times come to it to ask the way to such and such a place. The old uncle would say to us, 'Put the billy on and make some tea to give to this swagman.'

To us black kids it was a source of wonderment to see these white strangers sit and eat a meal with us, and genuinely appreciate it. They would tell my old aunt or mother what good cooks they were. When my uncle had shown them which road to take to the nearest sheep station or town, they would be on their way, little knowing the meal we had shared was the best we had, and, quite often, we didn't know where the next one was coming from. Aunt or Mother would say, 'Oh well, the Lord will provide' or 'Give, and it shall be given unto you.'

My mother's father, George Middleton, was one of three fair-skinned babies born in his tribe. Their mothers had to keep them near their side for fear of their being spirited away. They were about three years of age before the tribe accepted them.

Grandfather could not read or write, but he had a longing to have a farm of his own. With the help of some white farmers around who lent him equipment he cleared some land he'd bought. He farmed it successfully, and then sold it to a white farmer. He bought a bigger

piece of land, which he put his heart into. It was just a mile away from the Cummeragunga Mission, where his wife and children stayed, the children going to school there. His only son had died, so his name died with him. He had three daughters, who helped him when they grew older. I can remember my mother telling us that after her mother died they used to dig rabbit burrows, plough with the horses, work the chaff cutter, clean and wash. Grandfather always kept them busy even after they were married as there was a lot to do on the farm. But when my mother and her younger sisters got sick of the farm work, they ran away to a neighbouring Aboriginal Reserve, Warrangasda, situated near Darlington Point on the Murrumbidgee River. It has now disappeared but it was here my mother met Bill Clements, who she later married. And it was here that I was born.

Grandfather Middleton was a stern man, but my younger sisters and I spent many happy holidays at his farm, while my mother cooked for him and the Aboriginal farm hands from the Mission, who were mostly relations. My mother often made fig pies and fig jam from the small orchard near the farm house. The trees were so thick with leaves you could not see the sky through the foliage. But oh, our mouths would get sore from eating those figs.

We loved to take a lunch of fig jam tart and meat pie out into the sand hills where the men and grandfather were digging out rabbit warrens. We would watch them exterminate the struggling rabbits and would cry with horror and anger. We begged to nurse them for a little while. They were such cuddlesome, furry little animals. The thought that they were to be killed was too much for me, and once I sneaked away with one. I looked back and saw the men waving to me to bring that little bunny back, so I ran squealing to the farm house, bringing my

mother and aunt running towards me. They thought something awful had happened to one of us. They said my grandfather would deal with me, but he didn't, although he was a stern man.

I was twenty-one years of age when he died. I was at his bedside. I had a great respect and love for this quiet old man with the long snowy beard and thick snow-white hair. He died at the age of about eighty-five years. I felt he was a lonely old man. He died in a shack in Barham with my mother caring for him. He had sold his farm and he preferred the shack. 'Plenty fresh air,' he said.

I can remember one Saturday night, our only amusement being the pictures at Barham, my cousin Jack Patten, aged twenty, asked the old man if he would shout us. We were too afraid to ask because we knew the old man would not even spend money for the right kind of food, and my mother had to scrounge to see what she could find. Jack was told to bring the Bible and read to him, and we were made to sit round and listen. Jack didn't ask the old man for money again.

Grandfather left his three daughters a few thousand when he died. He was buried at Cummeragunga on the beloved Murray River near his wife and only son, and later his daughter, my mother.

My mother's maiden name was Theresa Priscilla Middleton. Her Aboriginal name died with her. (The English name was often taken by full-blood Aborigines out of affection for white people who befriended them, but half-caste Aborigines usually used the name of their actual father.) From the beginning, the white man—soldier, convict, explorer, squatter or trooper—let us face it, made use of the Aboriginal women. The part-Aborigine has come from these beginnings. This is now a big issue in Victoria and New South Wales.

My mother was the daughter of a full-blooded mother

Old Morago turn off west of Deniliquin, 1975. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

Old Morago homestead (still standing today) near Moonahculla. This was the home of the Eastman family, where my mother worked for many years. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

Old Morago homestead—the verandah. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

The grave of Aaron Godfrey Briggs in Cummeragunga cemetery. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

and was taken as a small child with her mother and grandmother, my grandmother and great-grandmother, to be part of the Mission experiment at old Maloga. She spoke only her tribal language then. Later, she became an assistant school teacher to Mr Thomas James, who had been appointed in 1883 as day school teacher under the New South Wales Department of Education. Mother was skilled in sewing and ironing and worked at these tasks and in caring for the children at several of the stations around the Murray-Edwards-Murrumbidgee area.

My mother was married to William Clements, called Bill, in a Catholic Church in Gundagai, fourteen miles from Brungle, where my father's mother lived. My grandmother had six children that I know of. She was just on six feet tall and a full-blood. I see the church where Mother and Father were married, every time I travel by car or bus to Canberra or Sydney. It is always a joy to see the Murrumbidgee River, where I was born. My birth was registered in Hay in 1904, as was my youngest sister's, Geraldine Rose, born in 1910. Two other sisters, May Edna, and Evelyn Louise, were born on the Murray River. May died about twenty years ago, before my mother. She took the life of our people, the Aborigines, very much to heart. It is a long story, which I won't say much about, because it is hers.

May and Evelyn were born at the Cummeragunga Aboriginal Reserve. Four girls, all within six years, no wonder Father went shearing and roaming! At one time we did not see him for five years.

Father, who was of the Wirrardjerie tribe, was a fine stamp of a man and, in a way, we were proud of him. During the prime of his life he was chosen with other coloured people to act in some of Oscar Asche's plays. Peter Felix, Edgar Bux and other well-known singers

were part of that group. Peter Felix was half an inch taller than my father, who was six feet five inches. I remember him acting in Oscar Asche's plays *Chu Chin Chow* and *Cairo*.

Old Granny Bedgie, my father's mother, planned a walkabout to many areas to show my mother to other relations after my parents' marriage. One of these walkabouts was to Blacks' Mountain, which was a favourite camping spot of the Wirrardjerie tribe. Game was plentiful there and it was a happy place. This particular walkabout was taken when I was three months on the way to being born. I believe that Black Mountain near Canberra, is the Blacks' Mountain that my mother told me of, where she went walkabout long ago. Now I hear it is a park for all people and that is how it should be.

When Father took ill, Mother went to help nurse him in his last days. It was about forty-five years ago. He wanted me to go over to see him and bring my little daughter, who was only two then, but times were hard, so I could not make that trip to Sydney. I longed to visit his grave. I feel he must have been a lonely man. He was buried in Rookwood cemetery, Sydney.

As I have already told, Father was absent for years at times. He was a roamer. When he came home he was like a stranger to us at first, but for the short time he was with us we learned to respect him, and had no animosity towards him. My youngest sister had been a baby when he left on the five-year trip, so she did not know what it was to have a father, let alone to call that man 'Dad'. We had plenty of uncles and cousins, in fact everyone was uncle, cousin, or aunt at times, especially if we wanted something.

Father would sometimes play ball with us, throwing to each of us, and my youngest sister would call to him:

'Throw it to me now, man.'

This happened several times until Father got a bit hurt and annoyed. He stopped the ball game, and gathered us around him. He put his arms around the little sister and said to us all, 'I am your father, don't call me "man". In future call me "Dad".' He looked at our little sister and said, 'You are my baby girl, and I am your Dad. It is wrong to say "Here, man, give me the ball".'

We started playing again and the little sister got excited and called him 'man' again. He pretended not to hear her, but she remembered and said hesitatingly, 'Man—Da—Dad.' He picked her up and hugged her. It was 'Dad' from then on.

He was a wonderful cricketer and high jumper. But once a shorter man dead-heated with him in running, so I always had a great respect for the short man after that.

The nearest big town to Moonahculla was twenty-five miles away—Deniliquin. Some lucky family might have a buggy drawn by one or two horses, or perhaps they were unlucky, as it would be borrowed by the rest of the community. It would be loaned reluctantly, but in case of illness never refused. You can imagine the difficulties, travelling twenty-five miles with buggy and horse on boggy roads, with mud up to the axles. By the time you arrived at your destination the horse would be dead beat, and you would be lucky to get there within two or three days. However, it was an adventure, and we loved it.

Sometimes the police from Deniliquin would visit the Reserve. It was part of their work. We would see their shiny helmets coming around the river bend. We children would dive under a bed or run for the lagoon, which was joined to the river. The growth of shrubs made a good hiding place. It was not only the children who were afraid of the police. Even if they spoke to a grown-up, that person would see nothing, hear nothing,

and say nothing. No doubt there were some good fellows among the police, but we had reason to believe that contact with anyone in those uniforms was not good for us.

One day, three Aboriginal children walking along the road that ran by the river bank, chatting happily, did not notice a horse and rider until he was right near them. The policeman looked down from his horse, and observed their stony faces.

'Hello,' he said to them, but their gaze was on the ground, not looking to right or left.

One girl was twelve years of age, the other eleven, and the boy about the same age.

'Hello,' the policeman said again. No answer.

'Hello. Is so-and-so at the Mission?' (He meant the Blacks' Camp).

There was no answer.

'Has he been drunk again, and playing up?' The policeman asked. Children still walking along, heads down and silent.

The policeman raised his voice angrily. 'If you don't answer me, I'll lock up the three of you.'

The children looked at each other with frightened eyes. A quick look at the horse—no, they couldn't outrun that. The younger girl clutched the older and tried to hide behind her.

'Oh, I can see I can't get anything out of you . . .' the policeman gave up.

So whenever they saw the policeman's helmet shining in the distance, the children would run for the lagoon and the shelter of the bush.

My old aunt and others would think nothing of peeling off their clothes, tying them and our clothes on their heads, and with us clinging to them, they would swim across to islands in the lakes. I still remember how

scared I was, holding on for dear life, but as we did it often I not only learned to love it, but I learned to swim too—at the age of three.

Summertime, every day, we were down at the river swimming. Our parents would not let us go until the shade from the trees that grew along the river bank was over the water. Old Aunt and Mother explained that with the rest of our bodies in the water, the hot sun would beat down on the backs of our heads and necks, and cause us to be sunstruck. That is what it was called by our people. We children were not very happy with that arrangement, but our old folks were very strict about it.

One weekend, no school, we kids made up our minds to go up the river, hot sun glaring down on us. We were like ducks, we loved the water. Our ages ranged from six to thirteen years or a bit more—boys and girls. It was a natural happening. The bigger ones would wear long dresses normally, but none of us thought of these things as we sneaked up the river, where our parents couldn't see us. We all peeled off our clothes and it was a wonderful feeling when our hot little bodies hit the water. Squeals of delight. Time was forgotten, seeing who could keep under water the longest, who could swim farthest under water, throwing objects in the deepest parts of the water and retrieving them, diving from the limbs of trees that were overhanging. We forgot that sounds carry a long way, and that old Aunt would be looking for one of us to go and fetch a bucket of water for her in the cleaned-out kerosene tins that were used for water vessels.

When no one answered her call, she went to the river herself and heard the shouts and screams far up. It was a really boiling hot day, and she was very cross. Her eyes were very angry at the thought of us daring to disobey her, risking sunstroke in the middle of the day. We

spotted her through the scrub, and everyone rushed out of the river, gathering their clothes as they ran, some picking up the wrong ones. I can see it clearly even now, some of the big boys hopping along on one leg trying to put their pants on, the girls with their hair dripping, looking like something drowned dragged out of the water.

You can imagine twenty of them in their native state, and one elderly black woman who had a long green switch, and who did not spare the rod. The hot sun did not cool her anger, especially when she saw some older boys and girls who she said should have known better. (The boys as they got older were graded out of mixed bathing, unless both sexes wore knickers or dresses.) However, we were punished, and not allowed to go swimming no matter how hot the day was—we could only cool off by splashing in galvanized iron tubs, borrowed or owned.

We girls had well-kept heads of curly hair, which was a misery sometimes, because Mother and Aunt would go through our heads with a fine comb, bit by bit, to see if there was anything there. We would beg them to finish, as we wanted to play, but to no avail!

There was a beautiful sandy spot situated about half a mile from the Aboriginal Reserve. This spot was a creek or swamp-like place that was mostly dry unless floods came and filled the holes. Snakes were often seen there, and other wild life hid under the huge fallen trees and in the scrub. Our parents were afraid of snakes and would not allow us to explore there.

The sheltered bend of the Edwards River was nearby, and here some of our parents, my mother especially, came to gather the plentiful wood that was lying round. We were allowed to strip off and take a piece of soap, and wash our younger sisters or brothers. Our hair and little

bodies would be shining black, only the soles of our feet and hands would be white. I know white people find this a source of wonderment.

We would get up to a lot of fun and frolic, diving under the water, then swimming to and fro across the river. We would put our little sisters or brothers on our backs, crawling on our hands and knees pretending to be a horse, and bucking them off. Once I unseated my sister and the next thing I saw was two legs sticking up, her head under water. When I got over the shock, I grabbed her, and then saw my mother's terrified face. She had a big stick in her hand to wallop me. I had to think quickly. I felt little sister was safe enough now, but I wasn't! I swam for safety into deep waters, until we were almost ready to go home. Then very helpfully I gathered the dried clothes from the bushes (such good drying places), helping my mother, but keeping my eye on her in case! However, all was forgiven and forgotten, as we carried all our clean washing home.

If our men were lucky they could have a job through the year on a sheep station where there was a homestead. With their wages they would buy two or three sheep between them, bring them home, and share round all the families. When a sheep was to be killed, the children would be hunted away, only to return to beg for a part of it to cook on the coals. We were always hungry, and we wanted it right away. I do know that sometimes the squatters would miss a sheep, but as we devoured stews, grills on the coals, or soups, we did not question where it came from; we knew we had to keep our mouths closed.

In a drought there would be hard times, and with no social services in existence, food was hard to come by. The rivers were dry, so there were no fish; ducks and swans had gone farther afield; emus and kangaroos had disappeared, because more fences were being built to

keep them out. We children knew what it was to have empty tummies although many times, in fact, I don't think our hungry cries for food were even heard. But sometimes a relation would come to light with a damper. Slices covered with wild honey would be given to us *pang pang gooks.* I can remember trying to make that slice of damper last as long as I could, but I never really mastered the art! My sister next to me in age, who was never strong, would nibble at her slice gently, and as the rest of us were still hungry, we would watch her. She would break off a piece to give us. We would feebly protest.

'Oh, no, we have had ours.'

And she would answer 'I'm not very hungry.' She was always like that.

Some enterprising families had a few goats, which multiplied very fast. I remember some boys and even one or two adventurous girls would try to ride on their backs, only to be chased by the old billy goat with tremendous horns and long whiskers. In drought time of course the numbers dwindled away for want of food. Although I have had my hungry moments since, I have never eaten goat since those days.

Things were not too bad when Mother worked on neighbouring homesteads and stations. We would benefit by left-overs from the kitchen. She would walk miles from these places where she worked back to our Settlement. The aunt who helped rear us four sisters was my mother's sister. My uncle, her husband, was of the Wamba Wamba tribe. Our mother and aunt were both born in the Murray River district.

We spent our childhood days between Moonahculla on the Edwards River and old Maloga, near the Murray River. This was the place where many different tribes were brought together by the Rev. Daniel Mathews, to see

how they would take to living in groups. Later on they were moved to Cummeragunga, across the river from Echuca. It was here that Mr James, an Indian from Mauritius, became our teacher. We all loved him. He taught three generations of Aboriginal children. He taught my mother. As I have mentioned, at the age of sixteen she became an assistant teacher to Mr James. He helped the Reserve doctor and we looked upon him as a doctor too. He had learned how to use and mix up medicine under Dr Stoney's teaching. Years afterwards, when Mr James had finished his time teaching, our people would send for him from far and wide, when they were sick.

My mother and aunt spent long times at Cummeragunga, their home Settlement. While Father was away shearing, Mother worked. He was much sought after as a shearer in different states, so we didn't see a lot of him.

My younger sister, who was about two years or eighteen months at this time, stayed close to my aunt and uncle as they roamed about. I can remember being poled by them in a canoe around the Moira Lakes, an overflow from the Murray River. Our people often camped round the Moira Lakes, as there was a plentiful supply of fish in the season, and swan and duck eggs.

My mother's and aunt's tribe and many of the other tribes scattered around have now intermarried. I feel we are now one big tribe together. Earlier each of our tribes had their own head men and women, who led their people in activities and gave advice. As far as I can remember, the women could hunt game as well as the men.

During the time we lived in Cummeragunga, I recall it was a much more happy environment than at Moonahculla. It seemed to have progressed. The living conditions were better. A cottage was given to our family to

live in, or else we would live with relations, of which we had many. Then there was always our grandfather on the farm a mile away. Mother or Aunt would each go once or twice a week to wash and clean house for him when the farming season was slack. Of course it was a great joy for us to go along to play underneath the fig trees and around the sand hills. But woe betide us if Grandfather found us trespassing around the property on our own. He always felt we would get into mischief if adults were not around. At one time when we stayed at the farm, our father happened to be helping Granddad, also another Aborigine, half the size of my father, whose name was Sandy Glass.

My mother always had a following of young friends of her own age. On this day, they all gave a hand with the cleaning and the washing, so we finished early, and oh joy! we took home-made crayfish nets and little pieces of meat saved for the occasion and all of us, Mother, Aunt, two or three eighteen-year-old girls, and we children, climbed through fences round the dam that supplied drinking water for the stock. It was in the Mission paddock, about a mile away from the Cummeragunga Mission.

The day was very hot, and as we tramped across the ploughed field it was rough going for little bare feet. Our baby sister had been left at home sound asleep. Mother said as someone was at the farm it was all right, and we would not be away very long. The crays (we called them crawfish) were plentiful in that dam. We had learned to catch them the right way, and it was great fun. They are delicious to eat. Mother said it was time to go back to the farm because the little sister may be awake. We climbed through the fence. The older group was a few yards ahead, because we children had stopped to count how many yabbies we had caught, and we discovered someone

had pinched someone else's. One of the children happened to drop a cray and was just about to pick it up, when almost all of us noticed a tiger snake lying right across our path. The bigger children jumped over it, others jumped away and ran around it, but when my small sister tried to jump the snake curled itself around her leg and bit her below the knee. She screamed. I had forgotten about her in the excitement, but ran back when she screamed, but Mother was there before me. She picked up a big stick and struck the snake so hard she broke its back. But the stick broke too, and the snake tried to strike at Mother. She got another stick lying near and killed the reptile. We were all crying for our little sister who had been bitten. Mother, although weeping, told a couple of the boys to run to the farmhouse, which we were fortunately near, to see if our father was home. Luckily he was, and the other man, half his size. They broke records as they ran to see what was the matter. We were all screaming and crying. Father took his boots off, so did the other man, and they pulled out the laces. Mother had hold of my sister's leg, and was sucking out the poisonous blood for all she was worth. Father tied the bootlaces around the leg, two above and two below the wound. Then he and Sandy Glass ran across the ploughed fields—jumping fences, taking short cuts, all of us following. Mother, her long black hair flying, suddenly thought of her baby sleeping at the farm.

'My baby is all alone at the farm—I must get her.' She gasped out.

But one of the other Aboriginal women said, 'I will fetch her, you go on.'

Cummeragunga was more advanced than many Aboriginal Reserves. It had a doctor who visited the Reserve every week. On the day the snake bit my sister he happened to be at the manager's house in the quarters

where he examined the sick Aboriginal people.

Evelyn owes her life to Dr Stoney and the fact that he was visiting the Reserve that day. I feel too that Mother, sucking out the poisonous blood and spitting it out, Father, and little Sandy Glass played their part too. The doctor gave my mother some liquid to wash her mouth out. Evelyn today is a very attractive grandmother with sixteen beautiful grandchildren.

Such a lot has happened since those childhood days, since my mother's childhood days, the traditions and customs have gone since our great tribes were brought together to live and eventually marry. Even our beloved rivers the Murray, the Edwards, the Murrumbidgee, their waters flow on, never to return. But the giant gum trees at the Moira Lakes and in the Barmah forest whisper gently the tales and stories of our people when they lived and hunted there long ago. They tell us there is hope for us all, and the world can be one big joyful tribal ground if we care enough for all people.

Sometimes an Aborigine from another part of Australia would invade our little community at Moonahculla and make his camp or an old-fashioned *mia-mia* amongst us. He would be looked upon with great suspicion by the Edwards and Murray River tribes. We children would be curious, but were told not to eat anything these strangers gave us. We got used to them after they had been in our territory for twelve months or so. But one I shall never forget. He was a great big, fat old fellow. He would offer me, a girl of ten, lollies that he probably got from one of the Indian hawkers who used to come to the Reserve now and again. With as much dignity as a small girl could muster, I would turn up my flat little nose, and say, 'No, I don't want any.' I was miserable with disgust when my playmates teased me about him. I told my mother when she came back about

him wanting to buy me pretty dresses. My mother was angry and spoke very firmly to him. Later, we found out that he came from a tribe far away, whose custom it was to take child brides. My mother and the older men and women of our Moonahculla lot soon put him straight about *our* customs.

Old *Cooka* Aggie and *Nkuppa* Sampson were an outstanding pair who lived with their family at Moonahculla. Their family is one of many families who are now only shadows and memories of the past. Their ten children have now all passed on, with the exception of one. Old *Cooka* and *Nkuppa* Sampson seemed very old when I was a small child. The Sampsons, like so many, lived in a one-roomed shack with an earthen floor pitted with potholes through long use by their big family. The fire was kept blazing on the cruel frosty nights to counteract the draughts. They all slept on the earthen floor covered with threadbare blankets, handed out by the government of those days. Inadequate food and cramped quarters, light clothing, and the hard work of shearing—travelling from one station to another—weakened their constitutions and so most of them fell an easy prey to tuberculosis.

Tuberculosis was a terrible scourge then and accounted for the lives of many hundreds of Aborigines in our area to my knowledge. There was carelessness, thoughtlessness and unkindness in the administration of Aboriginal affairs in those days, which is a great blot on the history of Australia. We seemed to be just like guinea pigs—for experimental purposes. The government I suppose did not know what to do with us.

The missionaries were very kind, when you think that life for them was pretty tough too. One thing is certain. Our race should never have been allowed to dwindle, either through disease or through exploitation. When

one is called half-caste, one feels very bitter. But I believe this story of mine may help both our dark youths of today and white people too, to see the real causes of the so-called Aboriginal problem. It may help both sides to understand each other better. Sometimes even now, we are thrown a juicy job like a bone thrown to a dog, to keep us quiet. That sort of thing simply divides one from the other. I am glad to say that most of our people see through such actions, but, being human, greed and ambition sometimes get the better of us, and we are used for wrong purposes. God help us all.

The Sampsons, Granny Aggie and old *Nkuppa,* were like most of our people in those days: they shared their flour and tea and sugar with anyone in need. When the boys came back home after being away shearing, they would hand out bright new florins to us children saying, 'Go and buy yourselves something.'

I can remember seeing old *Cooka* trying to separate the boys when they got into a scuffle, hitting them with her broom every time their backsides came within reach. She was such a tiny old woman, and old *Nkuppa* was a bent old fellow. They always spoke together in the language. He was full-blooded, a very silent man. In all the time I knew him, I cannot actually remember hearing him speak to anyone except his wife, even in his own language.

In later years as we were growing up, every evening as the sun was setting, old *Cooka* Aggie would start to wail and weep for her dead children. As well as the ten who had lived, others had died in infancy. We children would gather round the shack in silence and grieve with her. Sometimes the missionaries, Miss McCribben, Miss Bagnell and Miss Brown, now all passed on, would sit there too, just to show their sympathy.

The old lady would rock herself to and fro as she

wailed in the language the names of her dead children. Some of us would cry too. Old *Nkuppa* would sit cross-legged by himself quietly, his head bowed.

Next door to the Sampsons was the family of old Billie Briggs, whose wife was the niece of my old Uncle Osley Ingram. Bill Briggs was one of the descendants of Truganini, whose daughter was brought to the mainland from Tasmania by the white man Harry Briggs, many, many years before. I went to school with this family and we were close friends.

Old *Nkuppa* Taylor and his family lived next door to the Briggs. The so-called houses were just makeshift places. One of the Taylors married one of the Sampson daughters. Many of the Taylors married into neighbouring Aboriginal people who lived at the Settlements of Cummeragunga, Warrangasda or Brungle—all from tribes along the Murray and Edwards Rivers. It is becoming hard to distinguish even part-Aborigines now. It is indeed fortunate that the Aborigines up the top end of Australia are thriving and being cared for by the government. But the main thing is we are people—whether white or dark or mixed—and we are all members of the human race and can all contribute to this country and the world in the way God means for us.

Grandfather Noble, another old full-blood identity in the area, was nicknamed Old Marvellous. He used to say, whether he was pleased, happy or unhappy, 'Ain't that marvellous?' My memory of this lovable old man was his kindness to us children and my mother, of whom he was very fond. He was my grandmother Bedgie's brother. Some children in those days felt he was a Witch Doctor. Mother and we children loved the old man, because he was good, although a bit cunning. He was very generous and would share his food with anyone. He loved his booze, and my father would scold him about

this. The old man would go away into a quiet corner and sit down for a while. Then he would say to Mother, 'That boy (meaning Father) him no good. Ain't that marvellous?'

The descendants of those Aborigines no matter how light-skinned they now are, are of Aboriginal blood, and have made the earth richer in this land of Australia which God has given us all. There is plenty of room for everyone. Thank God for the spiritual heritage we have. That keeps me keeping on. I think of us all as one big tribe now reaching from Moonahculla, Moulamein, Lake Boga, Swan Hill, Robinvale, Echuca, Barmah, Cummeragunga, Mooroopna, Shepparton. There were no state boundaries before the white man came, and our people roamed far and wide.

I am not a person of perfection, far from it, and I still get cranky when I have all my grand and great-grandchildren around me, not in harmony with each other. But when they have gone home and all is quiet, I long to see them and wonder when they will come again!

Above: Cummeragunga cemetery in 1975. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

Right: Cummeragunga cemetery. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

Cummeragunga cemetery, 1975. The inscription reads:
This monument is erected by relatives and friends to the memory of our beloved people. 'They being dead yet speaketh.' (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

Moonahculla—the foundations of a house—all that is left.
(Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

Elm trees at
Moonahculla.
(Photograph:
Dennis Mayor)

CHAPTER TWO

FOOD SEEMED TO BE PLENTIFUL around the Murray River and the lakes, but when the heavy rains came, the lakes and forests would be flooded. After the water went down, you could see the water marks six and eight feet high on the trees in the forest. I visited the lakes and the Barmah forest not long ago. Some friends took me to the 'Back to Cummeragunga' celebrations. It was great fun meeting old schoolmates from both Moonahculla and round the Edwards River, who had also gone to school at Cummeragunga. Again, my heart ached when I visited the cemetery. Some of the graves were well kept by their families who lived in the district. Other graves over one hundred years old were just flattened and overgrown. I long for that cemetery to be cared for, the names of those buried put on a monument, and an iron

fence built around it. When I lived in this area times were hard, and game was hard to get: station owners and squatters had put fences across the land, and natural food like kangaroos, emus, and even rabbits were scarce. They were being exterminated because grass was precious for sheep and cattle. Even fish were hard to get. In the drought years, rivers went dry, swans and wild duck deliberately avoided flying over or coming anywhere near the Blacks' Camp because the men and even some of the women were good shots with a rifle or a double-barrelled shotgun, which was always handy in the house or humpy. One day a lone kangaroo was spotted in a clearing in the bush. A couple of dogs were let off the chain, and a gun hastily seized, only to find no cartridges, and the dogs were not the right kind to chase big game. Later, although hungry, we discussed the incident with much merriment.

In rainy seasons there were many luscious green wild edibles that we enjoyed, with the white man's salt. There were young milk thistles, young growth of what white people call dandelions, but we call *buckabunge*. We robbed beehives and used the precious honey in many ways, sometimes sweetening tea, as sugar was scarce. Most of our people shared what they had—damper, a bit of tea—although sometimes reluctantly. We did not blame each other for that, because it was a miracle if a home had enough food, and sharing was a natural thing to do.

When our old people were hungry, they would pick up or borrow an old fishing line, or make their own. I have often seen the old people making their own fishing nets.

One day like many others when we were feeling the pinch—remember, there was no unemployment help in those days—Mother picked up Old Auntie's fishing line. We all armed ourselves with other lines and followed

Mother down to the river. We looked around for bait, which was easily found after years of practice, as we used mostly worms. We threw our lines into the river and sat quietly waiting for nibbles.

All of a sudden one of our party noticed a police officer and a young constable coming round the bend of the river. It was Sunday and we had not expected that the police would be on duty. We all gasped, *'Cunnichman,'* which means policeman in one Aboriginal language. All the children took in their lines and sat on the bank, but Mother kept on fishing. We hissed at her in fierce whispers: 'Mum, the police are coming' and Jack Patten, our cousin, hissed: 'Auntie, look out—*Cunnichman* is right on us.'

Mum said, 'Yes, I know.'

We all sat still and waited.

The two policemen came to a halt. The senior officer gave a little cough, but Mum kept her eyes on her line.

'Good afternoon, Mrs Clements.'

'Good afternoon, Officer,' she replied.

'Do you know you can be fined heavily for fishing? It is closed season.'

Without looking at the policeman she replied, 'Yes, I know, but fish has been my people's food all through the ages, and it is my food too, and I am hungry.'

The officers scratched their heads, looked at each other, and walked on. We children, feeling like cowards, were able to breathe again.

I will never forget my first taste of goanna. One afternoon the children were playing together, when we noticed one of the tribal elders dragging a huge goanna by the tail. It was dead of course. We crowded around and followed him, everyone asking questions at once.

'What are you going to do with that, *Cooka?*' (*Cooka* and *Nkuppa* mean grandparent, or old person, and are not

necessarily restricted to either sex.)

We kept a good pace away from him, even though the goanna was dead. It was so big and long. He got to his *mia-mia* and said half in the language and half in Pidgin, 'Go, get some fire sticks.' This we did. He made a big fire, and proceeded to cook it.

'What are you going to cook it for?' we kept asking.

All the time, the old fellow would not answer. He went on with his business of cooking. Then he told us to get some green suckers—young gum trees two or three feet high. We watched him lay the cooked goanna on the clean green leaves, then take the skin off, and break it in pieces, get some white man's salt, which he sprinkled over the white flesh, and start to eat.

We all said, 'Ugh, Ugh.'

The old man went on eating, enjoying it, and watching us with his bright eyes. He broke off a few pieces and put them on some green boughs and then said casually in the language, 'Eat.' We hesitated but we were hungry. Dry bread and tea is not very filling. Old *Cooka* seemed to be enjoying it. One or two ventured to taste a little.

'It's nice, it's nice.'

Then everyone had a bit, and the old fellow looked amused. When some of the children told their parents, they shuddered and said 'Ugh, Ugh, you dirty *pang pang gooks.*' But when we told our mother, who we thought would be cross, she laughed gaily in a way I will always remember.

'Why, don't be afraid to eat goanna, it is good for you cooked that way, and the fat can be used for many aches and pains to cure them. You can rub your chest with it when you catch a cold,' she said. She went on to say that our people were forgetting all these good foods.

I can't remember seeing goanna cooked or eaten at any

other time, although Grandmother Clements and the Murrumbidgee Aborigines used to go hunting for them.

I can still remember the taste of hot damper pulled out of the ashes, dusted clean with gum leaves, and put on other gum leaves to cool. Auntie had to watch because we would be breaking off a piece when she wasn't looking. We drank our black tea from a pannikin (tin mug) and when Aunt or Mother weren't looking we would saturate it with sugar, which was usually hard to come by. When we could find wild honey we put that into the tea. Sometimes there would be no tea or bread, but in spite of hunger and difficulties I am here to tell the tale, thanks to our parents and the good Spirit.

Sometimes we would gather wild plants to eat, such as *buckabunge*. After the rains they would grow two to three feet high, luscious and tender. Now they are hard to find even for the canaries in the cities. In its wild state in the bush, it is still an instant, juicy morsel to eat, especially a bunch taken home, washed well and eaten with salt. Before it shows signs of flowering, the dandelion washed and soaked in salted water is delicious to us bush people. We ate the roots of many plants, especially the *cumbungies* growing around natural waterholes or creeks. The roots were thick and when cooked in hot ashes were much enjoyed. As children we loved gathering *pollies,* the mistletoe growth on gum trees, which contains a lot of soft little seed. We threw sticks at the hanging growth to bring it down and then ate the little seeds. We did not suffer any ill effects.

I don't know where the little bits of sweet-tasting substance like honey came from that we found in light bark an inch or two long or on dry gum leaves. We called it manna, a Bible name. There must be a simple explanation for its appearance at certain times of the year. It was like a sweet, as good as lollies. The first sign

we had that it was in season was when it stuck to our bare feet as we walked along the river where the trees were bushy and tall. Then it would be on! We *pang pang gooks* would have a marvellous time searching for it while it was in season. Then it would disappear as suddenly as it came.

The much-talked-about witchety grub was found in gum trees. Our youths, who we called cousins, would get a tomahawk and a thin piece of hooked wire and search in the bark for this delicious morsel. They would cut into the tree about an inch deep and half an inch across. The wire would be carefully inserted so that the big, juicy, wriggling pink and white grub would not be mutilated. Although I have not eaten these wriggling delicacies since I was a child, I can say there is nothing to compare with them for taste. However, I could not come at it now. But I wonder? I won't eat things such as oysters or mussels uncooked, but white people do. I have seen oysters picked from the rocks on seabeds and eaten—ugh! What do oysters live on anyway?

I can remember seeing a pregnant woman go to the river bank, the earth baked dry by the blazing sun, and pick up a little square piece of it to eat. There was something in it she was in need of. We children got to tasting it and liking it. We would grind it between our teeth and then swallow it. I have seen babies just beginning to crawl do the same thing. No dirt is so clean as when a running river has receded and the blazing sun has cooked it.

There was a fungus that grew on the gum trees, sometimes weighing six pounds, all shapes and sizes. We called it *punk*. When it was dry, we would soak it with white man's kerosene and light it at night. It would blaze for some time, creating warmth and light.

If we suffered from sore eyes, they would be bathed

with lightly-boiled strained gum leaf water. If we had dysentery, melted gum from the gum trees would be given us to take. A festered sore or a boil was treated with hot marshmallow leaves or stinging nettles, as hot as we could stand it.

If we had a cold, our chests and the soles of our feet were rubbed with goanna fat, a mighty cure. I still believe in goanna fat as a cure. Of course when we learned of some of the white man's cures, we were glad of these too. Mother or Aunt would give us a teaspoon of sugar with drops of eucalyptus if we had a cold. If there was no eucalyptus one drop of kerosene—ugh—just as bad as castor oil. Every time I see a narrow blue bottle I think of castor oil, and how we used to be lined up at the Cootamundra Domestic Training Home years later for our tablespoonful of castor oil every so often. Someone would be standing by to give each one a spoonful of sugar to deaden the taste, a kind thought from Matron. Until one day I said I would rather have a pinch of salt, and everyone was made to have salt. I got a banging from the kids after. They liked sugar. But matron said salt was cheaper. However, that story comes later.

Old Man Weed, English for *Petibela* and *Pallawah Megra* in Aboriginal, was a powerful medicine. When it was beginning to go to seed, we would pick it and sniff it, or play a trick on someone who did not know about the effect it had: it made one sneeze one's head off when it went to seed, and was strongly believed to be a cure for many illnesses.

We learned from Indian hawkers that stinging nettles made a very fine vegetable dish, also a weed called fat hen, which is good boiled with a tablespoon of dripping or butter. It is very tasty. We only used dripping.

I do not remember our tribes in these areas eating snakes, not in my time, or Mother's, Grandmother's or

Great-Grandmother's. Maybe they were scarce or not the palatable kind. I have seen films showing Aborigines cooking and eating snakes, which appeared to be large specimens with the oil or fat oozing from them when cooked. I feel it must be a valuable food. A grand-niece from another state informed me that snakes were a natural food for the Aborigines where she came from.

I had not tasted eels until I went to Melbourne. The first time I saw pieces of eels being cooked, the flesh was jumping about. Ugh! It made me squirm. They looked so much like snakes. It was a good while before I would try them. That was years ago. Now I love them.

The Barmah forest yielded up its food in abundance in season: crayfish, turtles, wild ducks, swans and their eggs. Those meals came to us without the source being destroyed. I sometimes wonder if the opening of the duck season is managed right and in an economic way, beneficial to both ducks and people!

I can remember going walkabout as a child. White people would call it a holiday. However, a walkabout was a useful holiday. My people did not go walkabout at random. They went to pastures that were not new to them. They knew when these pastures would be flourishing with fresh growth since they had last been there. We had an instinct for these particular pastures or bushlands. They belonged to us—no other tribe would trespass on them. We were wary of Aborigines from other tribes, and watched their customs with suspicion. Older Aborigines are still suspicious. Tales of the doings of the Witch Doctors usually ended with the good beating the bad. Our Aboriginal people were gentle, simple, dignified, lovable characters. They were grateful for anything done or given to them. Like human beings all over the world, they loved you to love their *pang pang gooks* (children) and to be kind to them.

On hunting trips, I remember being carried on my old aunt's back in a possum rug, warm and snug, the gentle rhythm rocking me to sleep, little knowing how many hard bumps were avoided. There were often flooded areas or rivers to be crossed. I remember watching my old uncle as we came to a river to be crossed. Uncle would get his tomahawk, look for a suitable gum tree, shape a canoe with his tomahawk in the bark, loosen it by tapping the outline of the canoe and ease it out with a wedge made of hard wood.

Aunt would make a fire, very hot, but constantly stirred so as to keep an even temperature to dry the sap and moisture out of the bark. While this was gently steaming, some good food would come to light: damper freshly made, tea, and maybe some fish or a river turtle. We loved witchety grubs, cooked in ashes not too hot for not more than a minute or two. You can have all your oysters from the sea or mussels, the French their frogs, but some of the wild food eaten by Aborigines was second to none.

I saw wild pigs, swans, emus and animals such as kangaroos cooked in a large hole in the ground, all specially prepared and wrapped in leaves, with hot rocks or mussel shells around it, to make it cook quickly.

Before the canoe was dried out on the fire, it would be moulded and small wedges cut for each end and stuck through to keep the ends together. Then gum from the trees was melted down and used to glue the ends. Mud was caked into the cracks. Amazing as it may seem, I remember hard-baked earth being kept in the canoe, on top of which a fire was lit to boil the billy for tea, while they were fishing. After the billy had boiled there would be enough coals to grill a couple of nice-sized fish. Of course the fire would be watched so that it didn't burn the canoe. They knew what they were doing.

Walkabouts were a source of wonder and delight to the children. Tiny as we were, we would take part in wading through swamps, chasing bandicoots and young ducks—the old mother duck cunningly leading us away from her young brood. A swan would stick out its neck, its beak opened angrily, feathers all ruffled, and turn on us and the little pet dogs that followed us. Often we had to turn tail and flee. Possums when caught for food would sometimes have a young one, which we would keep and rear as a pet. They were lovable things. Possums were only used as food as a last resort, in our clan anyway.

But their skins made the most beautiful, warm rugs. Kangaroo skins made warm floor coverings. Wombat and wallaby skins were used as well. I remember seeing the skins dried out and then treated with something, no doubt an ancient process handed down from generation to generation. This would make them soft and pliable. When a government blanket was available, the skins would be lined with it and would serve as a warm covering against the cold air when on walkabout. The women too would put them round their shoulders to keep out the cold.

When huge gum trees were cut down for their wood and bark to be used for huts and roofing, we children would be highly delighted, and after the bark was off we would scrape the moist sap from the trunk. Although our parents scolded us, and threatened that we would get worms in our stomachs from eating it, that did not bother us as we relished it so much.

In lamb marking seasons, the men working on sheep stations would bring back large bags of woolly sheep tails to our Settlements. Some people would say 'ugh ugh,' but our parents would make us collect wood, especially bark, which would make good ashes. The woolly tails would be thrown on the hot ashes, and left

until they were cooked. Then they would be raked out, the wool gently pulled off, leaving the cooked meat clean and delicious inside. Some of it would be put into a large vessel with a little salt, and sometimes pepper, covered with water and gently simmered for five minutes. When cool, there was a beautiful dish of jellied lambs' tails.

CHAPTER THREE

As children we used to clamour for stories of the olden times, as we called them. Sometimes in the evenings a group of the older Aborigines would sit around the camp fire, the light shining on their dusky faces, smiling as they told of amusing happenings, or solemn as they told of sad happenings—the latter, as I see it now, being inevitable as the white race took over. I remember how they discussed and yarned about the boss of this station or that, or the squatters and their families, or the small farmer. I wonder now how they could be without bitterness, how they could accept their lot without question.

As I listened to the tales told to us, handed down from our mother's grandmother, I did not realise their significance. They told of the white explorers travelling

down the Murray River. The Aborigines watched these men from behind the bushy gum trees, and ran silently from tree to tree as the men rowed down the river. My people were filled with awe, so we were told, and thought the explorers were Spirit Men. The red handkerchiefs they wore around their necks were thought to be a ring of blood. The tribe were keeping watch as they always did for strange tribes, friendly or otherwise.

When the squatters came to the district, the Aborigines had to get used to them. The squatters brought their sheep, fenced the land, and the kangaroos and emus disappeared. Our food supply diminished. But the squatters must have been kindly people, for they soon enlisted and trained our women and younger men to be of use on the homesteads and sheep stations. I can remember some of the names of these stations—the Ulupna, Puckawidgee ... but many have disappeared now, like the Aborigines and pioneers of those days.

The Ulupna tribe roamed far into New South Wales and around Mooroopna and Shepparton. Often different tribes would steal each other's women folk. Human nature is the same everywhere! My mother once relayed a tale to us of how my grandmother went to do the washing at a homestead about a mile away. She was of slight build, but tall and wiry and very fleet of foot. As she walked through the dense scrub, she listened, and kept her eyes darting here and there. Sometimes she stood quietly and gazed around to satisfy herself that no strange blackfellows were following her. She knew every twig and blade of grass and could see when it had been trodden on by man or animal. She arrived safely at the homestead, finished her work early, and decided not to wait as usual for her father and brother to fetch her. Time was getting on, and it would be late when she arrived back at the camp.

As she crossed the dry creek bed, which hid her from the homestead, possums were chattering in the trees, lizards scrambling under logs, and there were many wild creatures about. But suddenly she felt there was somebody watching her. She glimpsed two or three dark forms between her and the homestead. They realized that they had been seen, and called out something, whether it was to her or each other she did not wait to see. Like an arrow, she shot out of that creek bed and ran through the scrub. She heard their footsteps not far behind. As she passed an old broken down *mia-mia* camp, she cast a quick eye into the shadows behind her, and dived under a heap of lumpy bark. She heard her pursuers near, and felt terrified they would hear her gasping for breath. Their spears penetrated the bark where she lay, grazing her body and legs. Then there was silence. The Good Spirit must have been with my grandmother. Then she heard her name being called by her brothers and father, who had called at the homestead from a different direction, only to find she had already started for home. It was a narrow escape!

Old Granny Maggie told a story about herself and her husband, Gramps, who were from my father's tribe and came from Warrangasda, the old Settlement on the Murrumbidgee River where I was born. They were a lovable, wise old pair of Aborigines, who would often go walkabout to visit their many relations. (Any Aborigines, even from far away places, who had the same totems although speaking a different dialect, were considered relations. They were from the same Spirit world, not necessarily from the same flesh and blood. I think this explains why Aborigines are so clannish, and especially in those days we did our best to carry on our traditions. We four Clements girls were able to understand several Aboriginal dialects as children and even spoke a little of

some, as did other children at that time. Many of the old people could speak only in their own language. But the language has died with them, and is forgotten by their descendants in most parts of New South Wales and certainly in Victoria today.)

Granny Maggie and her old man went on walkabout, partly to see their relations, but also to look for their food in the bush on the way. They would sometimes ask for food at homesteads as they travelled. They were offered lifts in buggies or other vehicles at times, but mostly it was walking, walking. When they arrived at Moonahculla, old Gramps was in such disgrace that I doubt whether he ever lived it down. It appeared that at one point they were very low in food—tucker as they called it. They were 'meat' hungry. Anything living seemed to know they were coming. They had a drink of tea and a piece of damper but this was their last, unless a bighearted squatter or swagman would share. But Aborigines would rather share their own food than cadge from others.

As they sat by the camp fire eating their damper, they heard a noise up in the tree above them. There was a koala bear. They argued in telling the story to my mother and old Aunt and Uncle, and I am not sure who saw it first. However Granny Maggie made Gramps climb that tree to get the teddy bear. As I listened in the background, I felt a childish horror. We loved those bears although we were never lucky enough to have any as pets. They are very scarce in our part of the country. Maybe our people had used most of them up as furs to keep them warm.

Granny went on to tell how she had to bully old Gramps to climb that tree. But as he got nearer the poor little koala started to make a pitiful noise. The old man turned an equally pitiful face to Granny Maggie.

'Oh, no, Maggie, I can't do it,' he said.

Thinking of their empty dilly bags and, more important, their empty stomachs, she screamed at him in the language to go on. Gramps used a tomahawk to cut steps in the tree to enable him to climb up. However, just as he got near, the little animal set up a wail. Old Maggie kept threatening him from the ground, 'Get that bear.' But the bear kept up his wailing, and old Gramps imagined it was abusing them. Gramps got really upset and repeated that he couldn't do it. The truth was old Granny couldn't do it either, so she told him to come down and leave the bear. It was all told in the language.

'So our bellies stayed empty,' said old Maggie, with resignation.

But I gained the impression that she was glad they did not eat the bear!

Aaron Briggs spent most of his life in the Barmah forest along the Murray River near Echuca. The forest was a traditional camping place, handed down from our tribes. The Moira Lakes and their little islands were breeding grounds for snakes and birds—pelicans, all species of crane and the Native Companion, which was the Ulupna tribe's totem. I never tired of watching these beautiful birds. Uncle Aaron Briggs was part of that forest.

The Murray, Murrumbidgee, Edwards and the Darling all flowed into each other and those flowing waters gave life to the forest. The descendants of the Murray Murrumbidgee tribes of long ago jealously claim it still. It is a constant reminder of the past as it softly whispers its secrets of days gone by to the remaining paler descendants who, without knowing it, have craved its protecting caresses. We believe that our people of long ago add their murmuring, conveying messages of encouragement and hope.

Many things happened to us as we wandered through

My mother and her four daughters.

The Edwards River looking upstream. Moonahculla was on the extreme right. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

the Barmah forest as children. It was a great fishing and hunting area. When the river flooded we had to be careful as we roved through the forest looking for swan and duck eggs. I can remember too that some of our people got a living there from charcoal burning.

Aaron Briggs was much loved by us all. He was a valuable help to the Forest Ranger at Barmah. I think that was the only job he ever had. He lived to a great age, working in the forest he loved. He joined his ancestors on the little hill not far away at Cummeragunga where the wattles bloom and the gum trees overlook our silent sleeping ones, while the river flows comfortingly by.

Uncle Aaron was a great practical joker. He was a happy man. One day he brought home to the Mission at Cummeragunga a huge carpet snake. They are harmless I am told, but we feared them just the same, and I believe that when crossed with poisonous snakes they can be dangerous. Aaron had the snake round his neck and let it crawl into his shirt. When we were all gathered round, he would bring the snake out and caress it fearlessly while everybody drew back. But one day someone guessed his secret and noticed the reptile's jaws were tied up. He yelled, 'Look out, Aaron, the stitches are coming undone.' The shirt, snake, everything was torn off his back and hurled as far as he could throw. It was the last time he played that joke.

Aaron was wonderfully kind and many times I had a feed of the sweet Murray cod or other varieties of fish he brought home. I often long now for the taste of Murray cod, blackfish or bream, especially when grilled on the open fire. In the old days I remember the old people had the same longings. In the Western district, eels are the tasty morsels.

One of the blood-curdling stories we loved to hear was about an old woman who would mysteriously appear at

the camps of many of the tribes round about us. It must have been told by many, many mothers and many, many warriors to many, many *pang pang gooks* in many, many languages. (Children are either *pang pang gooks,* or *boories*; their mothers are *lerrooks*; women, *kring-krings;* grandmothers, *cookas. Nkuppa,* as well as meaning grandpa, can mean any old person, an affectionate term for someone near and dear to you.)

The people in a cluster of *mia-mias* were a peaceful-living lot, their children happy and well-cared for little *boories.* One day an old quaint woman ambled into the camp. She had big buck teeth, a nose that spread all over her face, and ears so big that they flapped. When the *boories* saw her they screamed and fled to their mothers. However, the old woman made herself agreeable to the grown-ups and some of the older children, and then left. But she had heard the parents say they were going on a big hunt, looking for food, as they were running short. The old hag returned and begged them to allow her to mind their children. She made such a fuss of the babies and small children that some parents agreed to leave them with her. The children of eight and upwards went on the hunting trip.

As soon as they had gone, the old woman got busy. She told the older children to pick up firewood. While they were away, she dug a shallow pit. When the children returned with the firewood, they were coaxed to make a pile in the pit and a big fire was lit. They were all excited when she told them to hold hands and dance around the fire. While they danced they forgot their fear in the excitement of the game. The old flap-eared woman clapped her hands and chanted *'Knunaga Burri-a, Knunaga Burri-a'* till she worked herself up to a pitch of frenzy. She picked up her long stick and pushed the fattest of the *boories* into the fire. The other children

screamed and took to the bush. She called after them in a whining voice, begging them to come back. But they stayed in hiding. The old woman cooked two of the fat little *boories* and wrapped them up in leaves and put them in a dilly bag. Then she went walkabout to the next camp.

Soon after, all the hunters returned to camp and found everything quiet and deserted. The mothers started to wail for their little ones and the warriors set out on a search deep into the forest, till they tracked down the terrified children, who could not move for fear of the old hag. But as soon as they saw their own warriors, they rushed chattering to them, telling what had happened. There was much wailing deeply with sorrow from everyone, but especially the mothers.

At that point two strange men from a far-away tribe arrived, and said they were black Witch Doctors, and were searching for a strange, flap-eared old woman with big teeth and a nose that spread all over her face.

After being told all that had happened, the two men said mysteriously 'That's her, we tracked her here.' Two warriors joined them, and they set off after the old hag. It was difficult to find her because the old *mok mok*, whenever they came near, would stand so still she looked like a black stump. However, the good Witch Doctors started to sing and dance and the birds, cockatoos, parrots and galahs started flying around screeching and calling 'there she is, kill her, kill her.'

They found her just as she was entering another cluster of *mia-mias*. The Witch Doctors threw their spears at her.

'I didn't do anything, what are you spearing me for?' she yelled.

The men had the horrible task of chopping her up into fine bits of mincemeat. They threw it all over the place

and into the air. Then they called to all the *boories* who she had killed and told them to come back, and they did! There was great rejoicing and a big feast of the game they had caught on the hunting trip.

That is why possum rugs came into vogue for carrying babies and toddlers on the backs of their mothers when they went hunting. Babies or children were not left alone with strangers any more. Ugh!

When we were children we were terrified of *beccas,* which seemed to be a cross between an animal and a human. Fleet of foot, they could run miles in a few seconds, and their hearing was so acute they could hear what was said miles away. Their sense of smell was extremely keen. Their own odour resembled that of a herd of goats. Their bodies were covered in white, grey or brownish hair. But their eyes, which were red and small, were very weak, and the soles of their feet were sensitive and tender.

(The old people would open their story-telling with a sound that went 'oo-oo-oo-oh' with a rising inflection, and this immediately commanded our attention.)

Oo-oo-oo-oh! Once there was a tribal camp with many old-time Aboriginal people. They lived and were happy in their own way. They had a wise old chief and many keen hunters, and the Aborigines were contented. The children were lean and tough even when quite small. They were learning to hunt and to read the old blackfellows' signs. They learned that the mournful cry of the curlew is a messenger of death, especially when it calls from a tree above a *mia-mia.* There are other signs of course, but we would rather not talk about them. Lots of these beliefs and signs are now forgotten.

Oo-oo-oo-oh! In the camp there were two lovely children, black with shiny skins, bright dark eyes, curly black hair and white teeth that showed a lot because they

were always laughing. Everyone in the camp loved them. They were carried around in possum or kangaroo rugs and occasionally in a platypus rug that was very much coveted.

One day the tribes were called together and told to get ready for a big hunting and to get the rugs and other makeshifts ready for carrying the young children. But some of them, including those two beautiful *pang pang gooks,* were too big to carry, and too small to walk far. The parents were afraid of the *beccas,* who had an eye for beautiful children. So they climbed the tall trees and made platforms and safety cages of strong grass where the children would be quite safe. If the children got hungry they could cry, and a possum or koala bear, who were not afraid of these little ones, would grab some *pollies* growing from the mistletoe on the gum trees and give it to them. Possums and koalas often sneaked around the *mia-mias* when people were asleep to pick up titbits. The hunters then went off to hunt.

But after a night up the gum trees, the children got restless and gazed longingly down at the ground. Two *beccas* emerged from the bushes, peering about the deserted camp with their short-sighted eyes. Their sharp ears had heard the children's voices up in their tree shelter. They peered up and said in sweet whining tones, 'What are you doing up there, little *pang pang gooks*?' The children replied that they had to stay up the gum trees until their mothers and fathers came home with the hunters.

'Then we will have plenty of good things to eat: *quondongs, cumbungies,* fish and kangaroo,' they told the *beccas.*

The *beccas* stood scratching their hairy heads, sides and legs, thinking, while the children watched them from above, whispering to each other, 'We must not go

down, mumma and dadda told us not to.' But the *beccas* squinted up at the tree-children and kept calling out to them in their whining voices.

'Come down to granny. We want to give you something nice. Come on loves.' They spoke in the same language as the children.

Some of the children climbed down, but the two beautiful three-year olds stayed up out of reach of the *beccas.* The *beccas* squinted in their delight, thinking they had all they wanted, until one of the older children called out to the two who were still up the gum tree,

'Come down, Nanny *Beccas* are kind and will hunt for us.'

The ugly-looking monsters added their whining voices. With the help of the older children, the two did come down. But the eyes of the *beccas* frightened them, even though they kept whining that they were their mummas. The two little *boories* said, 'No, No, you aren't our mummas' and began to cry.

At that point, the old *beccas* heard the hunters coming back, although they were many miles away. They swept up the two *boories* in their long, hairy arms, as the *boories* screamed in terror, 'No, No, we don't belong to you.' The other children could not stop the *beccas,* who in a few seconds had travelled many miles away from the scene. They could not even tell which direction the *beccas* had taken.

When the hunters got back some time later, they found crying children on the ground instead of up in the trees. There was much wailing and crying. The warriors painted their bodies and sat round in a circle and had a big talk-talk. Then they worked themselves up, first in a slow corroboree, which soon got fast and faster. They moved along the ground like snakes; then whirled and whirled in a wild frenzy of corroboree dancing. Then

they lay flat down with their ears to the ground, listening. All was quiet. Slowly, the men got up and stood erect. The chief pointed to four Medicine Men who were known for their wisdom and great thinking. They all disappeared into the bush while the rest of the tribe watched and waited. The children slept, and the night birds gave messages of comfort that those wild people seemed to understand.

Meanwhile the chief and the four Medicine Men cunningly circled and tracked the *beccas* in their traditional ways. Sometimes the *beccas* heard them coming and shot quickly to other parts. The Medicine Men realised they had to use different tactics. They knew that *beccas* loved drinking water and that they had to lie on their stomachs to drink. The warriors got to the next waterhole ahead of the *beccas*. They took a cunning short way. Then they draped themselves all over with the green branches of shady young gum suckers. They stood so still that they could not be distinguished from the trees.

The *beccas* arrived with the two little *boories* on their backs. They had decorated the children's curly black hair with lots of grubs and little fish. They must have thought this a stylish way of doing hair. Before lying down to take a drink of water they looked around to see if anyone was there and to listen to hear whether anyone was coming. As they squinted round the bushes, the warriors kept still and held their breath.

'You drink first, I'll watch' said one *becca* to the other. The little *boories* still on their backs started to laugh.

The old *beccas* said, 'What are you laughing at?'

They said, 'Only the strange shadows in the water.'

The other *becca* looked at the water and said, 'I'm thirsty, I am going to have a drink now, you take too long.' She threw herself down on her tummy. When both were on their stomachs drinking water, the chief and the

four Medicine Men speared them in the soles of their feet. The *beccas* screamed, *'Yack-i, Yack-i;* my feet, I can't walk, don't take our little *boories!'*

The warriors snatched up the *boories* and washed them clean in the clear water. They were smelling of dead fish. So the *beccas* learned their lesson and the parents too, who afterwards always carried the children in possum rugs until they were big enough to take long walks. 'Wee-ee-ee-o-o-h!' (Uttered in a descending note) is a typical ending to stories told by the old people.

The following words I love to remember. They were written by a great friend many years ago on an Aboriginal station in Victoria:

Neath the *mia-mia*'s leafy shadows
Where we spent those happy days,
Listening to the old folk's legends,
Of Australia's early days.

Gathered round the old camp fire
Underneath the old gum tree
The children with their happy faces
Dancing round in corroboree.

Those old days have gone forever,
Like the time our race dies fast
Yet we cling to those old memories
Handed down from out the past.

A happier, hopeful verse has been added by another friend—

Those old days have gone forever,
But the future's yet to be,
Where dark and white Australians
Will live in peace and unity.

CHAPTER FOUR

I STARTED MY FIRST SCHOOL in Moonahculla, taught by missionaries, who we loved. I have memories of their selfless giving. They received no salaries. Our schoolhouse was a shed made from boughs, the lovely green limbs loaded with leaves. I used to love the scent of those bush greens, even when they dried up with the hot sun. We had split fence posts for seats, and used slates and pencils for writing. When our slates got full of scribbles, we licked them clean again, but we didn't do this for long! Our missionary teacher got us wet and dry pieces of rag and showed us how to clean and dry the slates. Scribbling on them was a source of delight, but they cracked easily, and our teacher made us use the broken pieces. We were encouraged by a little reward for the best kept slate.

Nothing was too much trouble for the missionaries. They often shared their food with us, and helped our families when they were ill. In turn the Aborigines shared whatever game or food they had with the missionaries. When their time was up to leave the Mission, there would be much crying and sorrow. One of the few who could write would be called on to write to headquarters to ask for the missionary to come back. My mother was often called on to do this. Bless them. It was at their table that some of the older children learned what mayonnaise was, and other white-cooked food or milk-cooked food. We liked their sort of food and the left-overs that Mother brought home when she worked at a homestead.

Later, when I was older, I was fascinated by the lovely music the small organ gave forth for church and Sunday school. Miss Brown, a missionary teacher, tried to teach me to play. I played by memory or by ear, but bless her, she never knew. Once we were all in our Sunday best, waiting for Sunday school. We gathered around old *Nkuppa* Taylor—our favourite teller of stories about olden times. His old full-blood father or uncle was usually sitting near, but not saying a word. As old *Nkuppa* was telling us tales, we forgot the time until we heard Miss Brown's voice saying, 'Oh, here you are, didn't you hear the bell ring for Sunday school?'

We all jumped up guiltily, but dear old *Nkuppa* said half in the language and half in English, 'Do you know we had the Good Spirit a long time before you white people came here? The Good Spirit is everywhere. We know Him long before you white people come, everywhere in the bush He live, Him Good Spirit.'

When the missionaries had time, they would teach us white people's games. Our parents taught us their own games. Already football was known to the young

Aboriginal men. It was quite common for them to be called on to make up the numbers for a football team round the district. We would not know who to barrack for as frequently there would be Aborigines on opposing sides.

One of the games taught us by the missionaries was hockey. We would get an older person to cut a young sapling. The roots would be curved and easy to shape, so we had no worries where hockey sticks were concerned. When the game became faster, we yelled orders, weaving in and out of each other's way, hitting the ball up to the goal. The excitement was too much. We would forget the missionaries, and a few swear words would come out in the heat of the moment. Everyone would gasp at the culprit, then look at the missionaries. We knew our game of hockey was over for the day. The missionaries were just as exciting to play with as any of us. When the sticks and balls were collected by the missionaries, we would play rounders and cricket and even football with rag balls sewn together by an older sister or parent. Although it sounds soft, a ball of rag can hurt if it strikes you hard.

Sometimes swearing was done in the language as that wasn't understood by the white missionaries. But we learned that bad temper was not good as the players could not think straight, and wouldn't shoot straight or play fair. We would try to keep cool for a while after the missionaries went home or to visit our older people for a chat. But although we would try to capture the spirit of the game ourselves, it was not the same without those lively, lovable schoolteachers. We could hardly wait till next day to play again with those young missionaries, who were great fun. Everyone was allowed to play rounders and our parents would join in too. They would bat, and a young one would do the running for them. In a game of cricket, the bats were made of hard board,

although the really hard wood was scarce.

Football was hilarious. There were not enough boys, so girls made up the number. A grown-up would umpire the match, usually one of our wags, who would give the girls free kicks and favours. Half way through the game, the opposition would give chase to the waggish umpire and give him a rough time. It would all end up in good humour, from what I can remember.

Pole-jumping was another game we loved. Over high fences of logs, anything. I can remember when I was about eighteen years of age and working on a sheep station in New South Wales. When I went for the cows or to collect the mail, I would pick up a long pole in the bush, and jump, much to the amusement of the young daughter, who was about twelve. She would want to do it too, but was too much of a lady I guess to master it. When her brothers and their mates came home from college on holidays, they used to try it too. Their uncle, a young man with red hair and a face just as red, tried to get over that hurdle with the pole. I used to be delighted to beat them all. When I remember flying over those hurdles, my long skirt like an umbrella, my long black legs and bare feet going over, I blush with embarrassment even now. But it was fun, and the only fun I had—oh—and swimming, especially when the river was flooded.

Another game we took a delight in was stripping a green switch from a sucker of all its leaves. Down at the river we would get little bits of mud, roll them into a ball as big as a marble, stick it on the end of the switch and flick. We would have a competition, boys and girls, to see who could flick the mud ball the farthest. If we played by the river, you could tell who won by watching the splashes as the balls hit the water.

After the missionary ladies left Moonahculla we had a

crippled part-Aboriginal teacher. He was a proud man, and would not mix or let his family mix with the other Aboriginal people on the Settlement. Such is human nature! Our people didn't like him either. They felt they had their pride to uphold too! His wife and children were friendly though, and one of the step-daughters about my age would sneak down at times to hear my mother telling us stories at night. Mother would see that she got home safely. Mother would have liked to speak to her parents, but the girl would cry and beg her not to, as she would get into trouble for sneaking out.

Later, at Moonahculla Mrs Hill was our teacher, and it was while she was there that we were taken away to the Domestic Training School at Cootamundra.

However, most of my meagre schooling was at Cummeragunga Reserve, as we moved a lot between the two Settlements. They are both in New South Wales and only about fifty miles apart—a distance we thought nothing of. We would stay in the houses that had been built in the early days of the Mission Settlement by our people under the supervision of the Rev. Daniel Matthews and later Mr Bruce Ferguson, white missionaries of the Presbyterian Church. There were some people however who didn't move about, but stayed in the one area.

In spite of our walkabout existence, and often hard times, those days were the happiest of my life. Later on when the Aboriginal youths were moved to the country towns and cities, the moral standards our old Aboriginal people had kept long ago were easily forgotten. The fascination of the white skin was too much. There were some genuine ties of marriage, some of which turned out happily, some not. But I have found generally that it is not because of colour that a marriage can break down. It is the same between two Aborigines marrying or two

whites marrying. It depends on whether they have standards to live by. One can with one's loved family go down to the depths of hell floundering about in degradation, blaming present times or the other fellow. Sometimes I become tinged with hopelessness when I think of the long years of unhappiness and the struggles of my people since the white man came. I sometimes think how long does generation after generation have to live before we wake up to ourselves. We allow ourselves to be divided, black and white, one family feeling superior to the other because of colour, possessions or education.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mother, as I have already said, worked to help our old aunt and uncle feed and clothe us. When she wasn't working we loved having her at home with us all. She was loved by all, young and old; nothing was too much trouble for her. Like many of our women folk, she was a very able midwife. I heard someone say they would like a penny for every baby she had brought into the world. She showed us how she sterilized everything before she used it: bedclothes, sheets and towels. Preparations were made weeks ahead.

Once she was called in the early morning, after a night of bringing one of these babies into the world. She was having a much-needed rest. In fact, she was so sound asleep, she didn't hear a person knocking urgently. I heard the knock, and so did the mother with her new baby in the bedroom. I was afraid to open my mouth in

someone else's home, especially when the new mother said, 'Go away, Mrs Clements is asleep and very tired.'

When morning came, I told Mother what had happened. She was very upset and hurried around to the home that needed her, only to find that the baby had died. Someone else had not quite known what to do. Mother just burst into tears, and the sick mother had to console her, and told her she was not to blame, because of not hearing the knock.

Old people told us that when a new baby was born in olden times, cold ashes were rubbed all over it. It was like talcum powder, because it was naturally sterilized.

They were truly happy times until food became scarce. Then Mother would go back to see if her old job was there for her. Of course it would be. We would all miss her very much. She not only cared for the sick people but also for the animals.

I have known her to run two miles on the other side of the river, having crossed at the shallow part, any hour of the night or morning to telephone a doctor for advice, or beg him to come those twenty-five miles from Deniliquin. Sometimes he would come but other times the sick person would be taken along the boggy roads to the hospital. The road was a bit better on the other side of the river, but at times the river was too high to cross. Now there is a bridge so that white station owners and others can get to and fro.

Sometimes Mother got up at night to attend to animals whimpering with the cold, to make them comfortable in a corner on an old bag or something. I saw her once help a beautiful, proud, fierce-looking eagle that a gun-happy youth had shot down, breaking its wing. I don't know how she fixed up the wing, but she kept the fire burning to keep it warm. There was a huge goanna too, that was wounded with a pea rifle. She taught us

Moonahculla church and Mission house. Missionaries watching men making bricks to build a house.

Mrs Robertson, who lived at Moonahculla, was related to the Ingrams. She remembered seeing the Burke and Wills expedition when she was about fourteen.

compassion for hurt things, and especially for hurt people.

When I visited Old Morago recently and talked with the Eastman family, who my mother worked for over a period of years, one of the daughters talked to me about her.

'Theresa Clements was a fine woman,' she said. 'There were a lot of us children, and Theresa was very good at sewing and would make all our clothes as well as helping my mother in the house. She was clever and she and my mother would exchange sentences in French when they didn't want us to understand. Once my brother broke his arm, and Theresa accompanied my father and brother in the buggy to Deniliquin. There was no room in the hospital, so my brother stayed in the doctor's home while the arm was fixed up. The doctor's wife was so pleased with all Theresa did, not only for my brother, but in helping in the home, that she hoped that she might stay.'

When Mother was not working and was at home for a while, the days were delightful. She would teach us new games that she'd seen the white children playing. At nights we would sit around a big fire, and she would read stories to us by the fire light. The adults would sit and enjoy listening too. One of our favourites in those days was *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Mother would close the book when we started sobbing and crying, and the grown-ups too would have tears running down their cheeks.

When Mother was cross, we made ourselves scarce. While Mother was home, old Aunt would take things easy, quietly smoking her pipe, but only letting the Aborigines see her do this. She would put it away when a white person appeared.

When Mother went back to work, old Aunt would take over again in her dignified way.

One day my girl friend, who was the same age as I, and

two sisters aged about four or thereabouts, went for a walk up to our favourite swimming place, where our parents loved to do the washing. We got bored and I made up my mind and theirs to go exploring the little inland bend of the Edwards River. It was thick with shrubs and high grass. However, before going too far, we climbed onto a big log, which gave us a clear view all around. We saw some dark forms through the trees—strange blackfellows. We were terrified, and the little ones started to whimper. Our way was cut off. We started to yell at the top of our voices. The good Lord must have heard us. We saw all the women coming around the bend running, old Auntie amongst them.

Afterwards they found the footprints of these strangers, who could have been friendly but no chance was taken. Before nightfall, the women got their home-made bush brooms, and swept all round the huts. We had been made to go inside. The dogs were tied up, the most savage near the door, which was fastened securely. The menfolk were working on neighbouring stations that were too far away for them to travel home at night. However, the dogs were a great protection and they barked savagely all night as they strained at their chains. We lay in bed, too afraid to move, and prayed for morning to arrive quickly. Eventually it did, but old Aunt would not let us out until she had investigated. She found bare adult footprints.

The next night we went through the same procedure. There was someone walking round. We could hear him telling the dogs to shut up. We knew his voice, but old Aunt told us to keep quiet. He was a well-known drunk, who we hadn't seen for months. We heard next day that he had been visiting every Aboriginal woman's shack. He was just as big a menace as a stranger.

When he came to our door, he was yelling and knocking, and shook the door. Old Aunt put her fingers

to her mouth, signalling us to keep quiet. She quietly went to the door to give more support in keeping it closed. Then the man's voice came over the top of the door saying 'I can see you there.'

We children were terrified, but brave old Aunt continued to hold that door, until he finally went away. This sort of thing happened rarely, as the nearest hotel, *Pretty Pine,* was nine miles away, and the next twenty-five miles away in Deniliquin.

Years later, after coming home to the old Uncle's funeral, everything about my background fell into place. Old Uncle's tribe spread far and wide, and was greatly respected. I can remember too his mate, Billy Day. Old Uncle Osley Ingram worked together with Billy Day on Old Weeri sheep station, at Caliama and Tulla, and many other smaller homesteads of those days. All these sheep stations were between Deniliquin and Barham round the Edwards, Wakool, Murray and Lachlan Rivers, part of what is known now as the Riverina District, a great, vast plain covered with old ragged gum trees and other shrubs as I remember it. We kids loved eating *quondongs* when ripe. The stones inside were as hard as they are to describe. Our people made bead necklaces out of them, and jam too when the sugar was available. As far back as I can remember we travelled across this plain, as old Uncle worked on the sheep stations: seasonal work—shearing, lamb marking and crutching, which is done for the sheeps' cleanliness and health. We children, tiny or larger, took it for granted that a dog had to be whipped for chasing sheep. We got used to seeing the kangaroos and emus away in the distance, occasionally near. All through our young lives we had young animals as pets, joeys, possums, emus, cockatoos and especially rosellas, and wild ducks. Our cats loved them too, as did our many dogs.

It was a never-ending wonder and joy travelling by

buggy through the bush and over the plains in those days, camping where there was water. If the weather was warm, just a *mia-mia* of fresh green gum branches put on the ground for the comfort of us *pang pang gooks*, a blanket spread over. I used to love those fresh gum leaves. I can remember it all as though it were yesterday.

When the busy seasons were over, our people were employed to dig out rabbit burrows. I do not know how long ago rabbits were brought from overseas to Australia. They sure did make themselves at home, and multiplied so rapidly they had to be got rid of like the kangaroos and emus (the blackfellow's food). These animals ate the grass needed for the sheep!

One day my uncle and aunt were digging these rabbit burrows. They had got to the end of the burrow when they came across an Aboriginal skeleton. They quietly put away their digging tools, after they had filled in the holes they had dug. They moved camp. I will never forget, even though I was a very small child, the solemness of that occasion. Those burial grounds were very sacred in those days. Those people of long ago are still as near and dear to us as if they were here.

Before Uncle Osley Ingram died and old Uncle Billy Day (they also had Aboriginal names), their boss on a station, who passed away before them, left in his will that they were to get no less than £1 per week for the rest of their lives from that station. A Mr MacRea left it to them. It was a great lot of money in those days. Our parents and their children never did get government aid, as some others did on other Settlements.

When my mother had a new baby, she would ask Auntie to mind her older children. They were happy days, even though some were starving days. When our men brought a sheep home from their work, every bit of that animal was used. Meat stews, roasted meat. The men

would try to keep the children away while they killed the sheep. We hated seeing it killed, but once it was over we would be clamouring for curly gut (sweetbread), heart, liver too, which my mother or aunt would cook in the large camp oven. It was a sort of haricot stew with browned onions, gravy and vegetables, especially potatoes. Every part of the sheep was used except the lights, which the hungry dogs would fight over. The intestines would be cleaned and then blown up like long narrow balloons. The bladder of the sheep would be scrubbed and blown up too. They were our toys.

The marshmallows grew higher than us. We would have fights with the long stalks, girls against boys. Then we would run through the stinging nettles with our bare feet and legs covered with lumps, just as an endurance test and for the fun of it.

My sister, May, who was taken to the Domestic Training Home at Cootamundra at the same time as I, was a very gentle person. She retained that gentleness and dignity to the end of her life. She was always neat and spotless and had the reputation of looking as though she came out of a bandbox.

She married a young man from Cummeragunga. My other two sisters also married Cummeragunga men, two brothers.

At the time of their marriage, May's husband was a much sought-after shearer. May had the idea that if she worked hard, between them they could save enough money for a home. May genuinely tried to achieve high standards and usually turned a blind eye and ear to what white people thought about Aborigines. But one day she said to me despairingly, 'A drunken white man lying in the gutter is thought more of than a black man, no matter how well he conducts himself.' I did not know what to say, but felt there was truth in what she said, remembering my

own treatment by white people between the age of thirteen and seventeen years. But time had healed my hurt a bit by then.

My sister decided to go to Melbourne to find work, as her husband and later their son were travelling about shearing. They were excellent shearers and earned good money. She thought their money together would soon be enough to pay the deposit on a home. But the white man's fire-water, which gave Aborigines the courage to mix with white men over the hotel bar, gripped her husband. It broke up my gentle, proud sister's life. She decided to end it all by taking poison. She was taken to the Echuca hospital and with the help of doctors, nurses and the matron, who was an angel, she struggled to keep alive until her son could be traced. When he eventually came back, he found it was too late to see her. That was twenty-two years ago. He broke his heart and took to drink. He too, is a gentle and respectful fellow, but lost.

My last waking thoughts and prayers as I lie in bed at nights are of the children, the coming generation, and of our sick society, caused through selfish ambition and greed.

I find I have a trend to over-love my grandchildren, which sometimes creates jealousy. Now when they come to see me, I join them in singing nursery rhymes, and then I tell them stories of the old Aboriginal times. As I sit and enjoy their company, they look at me and ask me to tell about little Red Riding Hood. I gaze at them. They are more light-skinned than dark, bless them. What does it matter? Colour is not the issue and they are beautiful and precious.

My sister May one day went rowing into the flooded forest with two of her pet dogs. She was looking for duck and swan eggs. She kept her eyes open for snakes, which were also on the look-out for eggs. I remember two men

fishing near the Moira Lakes once when a snake made for the boat, no doubt taking it for a log or a landing place. One of the men aimed his gun at the snake, but the rocking of the boat spoilt his aim and instead of getting the snake, he made a big hole in the boat. The two men and the snake were tipped into the water, all frightened! The men swam for the shore and the snake in the opposite direction.

But to return to May—she was rowing leisurely amongst the trees, forgetting that it gets dark quickly in the forest. She became dangerously lost with the water and trees all around her, and did not know how to find her way out. Her only companions were the little dogs. She sat terrified, listening to the night birds and imagining she saw bunyips and *beccas*. She had the sense to keep her boat in the one place, and kept coo-ee-ing, but with little hope of being heard. As she sat cuddling her little dogs, past happenings raced through her mind. She remembered a fox stalking her fowls one early evening as they roosted in the limbs of the trees about five feet off the ground. She became fascinated, like the fowls, when the fox first looked up at the tree and then kept walking round it in a circle. After a while down came the fowls tumbling and squawking. She was too late to save them, but afterwards she always kept her dogs handy.

She loved animals and looked after them. She kept her husband's hunting dogs tied up, as he thought a lot of them. One day however she felt she would let them off the chain and take them for a walk to stop them yelping. (She remembered all this as she sat in the boat.) She had decided to take her house dogs too and two watch dogs from the homestead where her husband was working. As she walked out to the open field and trees, the dogs yelped for joy and raced here and there. A few rabbits scurried for their burrows or under logs. May spotted a

kangaroo in the distance and prayed that the dogs wouldn't see it, but of course they got its scent. Ignoring my sister's calls, they gave chase. The kangaroo's only hope was a waterhole, a dam we call it, full of water for the stock to drink. He leapt into the water, standing his majestic six feet and turned to face his attackers. My sister yelled her head off, she said, trying to stop the dogs from attacking that beautiful animal. But they swam out. The kangaroo held his own and grabbed one of her husband's dogs by the neck and held its head under water. My sister was afraid of her husband's wrath should anything happen to his dogs. So there was nothing else to do but to get a big stick, wade in and help the dog to get free.

She told me she could remember for years afterwards and even had no sleep at nights thinking of that kangaroo dodging its head this way and that trying to evade the blows she aimed at him. Those big brown eyes haunted her. However, she saved the dogs, although they almost drowned, at the expense of the roo. She walked home with the tears streaming down her face, scolding them. When she got back she tied them up and gave them a switching.

As she sat in the boat thinking of all this, she heard a faint coo-ee. She answered it several times until she saw the lights of the lanterns on the boats coming towards her through the trees.

CHAPTER SIX

WHEN FATHER TOOK MY MOTHER and the four of us away from Moonahculla, leaving old Aunt and Uncle nearly broke our hearts. We shed tears, but our father said his old mother, our grandmother, wanted to see us before she died, and that we would see Aunt and Uncle again.

We arrived in Gundagai on a Show day. Everyone, my father's mother, sisters and a brother, and their families, were all in the town for the Show. I remember trying to guess which was my grandmother. We were surprised to find a six-foot, full-blooded old lady surrounded by her daughters and friends. There were hugs and kisses all round. We did not know who were relations, there were so many people. There was a pretty young woman with beautiful white teeth who was trying to hug us all the

time. She was a sister of my fathers. Then there was another sister who was pretty too, but lighter-skinned. There was an uncle, light-skinned, the same colour as my father, but much shorter. He was called Uncle Ernie, and we loved him right away. He was very kind to us. After the excitement of meeting all our Murrumbidgee relations (the Wirrardjeries), a big surprise awaited us. There were no buggies and horses to take us to where they lived. It was our first experience of walking twelve or thirteen miles. When we looked from the top of a hill and saw Brungle in the distance, we thought it didn't look very far. We were thrilled with those beautiful hills and streams with the plentiful fish. There were rabbits everywhere. We learned to catch them later. We would see them squatting in the grass, and my sister May would sneak up on the rabbit and fall on it. It was all so beautiful after the flat country around the Riverina District.

Nearly twelve months later I walked from Brungle to Gundagai, uphill all the way, and I fainted.

We loved Brungle. Grandmother had a four-roomed government-built cottage: two bedrooms, kitchen and front room. She kept it well. She had a little garden in front. One aunt lived across the street, another a few doors up the street. Only a few families had four rooms like my grandmother. Some had one room and kitchen, the others had just one room.

For the first time we, as a family, got government rations, the amount determined by the size of the family. We also got milk. We had to take a billy can to the manager's home, where they dealt out all the rations. It wasn't so much, but for the first time we were getting three meals a day. Mother, being a trained housewife, made everything go far. Fish and rabbits were plentiful and some fruits were growing wild. There were no rivers

very near, but a lovely spring where we got our water. An abundance of watercress grew in it, which we would gather. Mother showed us how to wash it, bit by bit, because she said leeches sometimes lived amongst these greens. We did not see any though and we loved eating it. The water was too brackish for washing, but for cooking it was all right.

During the school holidays we all camped down at the Brungle bridge, a few miles from the Reserve. It was a delightful place. May and I used to go hunting for rabbits. We learned how to distinguish the healthy rabbits from the sickly ones. Poisoned jam was used in those days to exterminate rabbits. The men would be given a big can of poisoned jam. One man would walk in front scraping a patch on the ground with a shovel, while another carrying the can would ladle a spoonful of jam onto the freshly-scraped earth. The rabbits would be dead in a few minutes after eating it.

During these holidays we loved to go bird nesting, until Mother saw us handling the birds and stopped us. She said the mother bird would not feed them if humans had been fondling them. A few days later we found four little birds dead in their nests. The mother bird had not fed them. It was a lesson we did not forget.

One fine day our grandmother and some of the older people, who called her Bedgie, took us up those high hills searching for goannas. Remembering old Uncle *Nkuppa* at Moonahculla and our first taste of goanna, we told her about it. She smiled her wise old smile. But I think all these reptiles must have seen us, because we didn't even get one. Gran said they sleep in winter, and winter was just beginning. While we were looking for them she told us about the use of their fat for colds or for any rheumatic ache or pain in your body.

Porcupine was something we tasted for the first time at

Brungle. We saw the most beautiful parrots too, the mountain lowries. The pet cockies strutted up and down on the Reserve.

One day we heard our little sister crying as she came down the street. (It wasn't much of a street—two or three houses on each side, some with gardens.) Our little *boori* neared the gate, crying, and behind her was old Granny Lizza's pet cocky crying too (Granny Lizza was my grandmother's half-sister). Our little sister was outraged when she heard us laughing. She looked behind, then wheeled around and chased the cocky. We yelled and cried, 'Look out,' for cocky had wheeled around with wings outstretched, screeching at her. She soon forgot what she was crying for.

It was delightful to go into the hills with our father when he was home between shearing jobs. He would dig out the rabbit burrows, and it was a big joy to bring home baby bunnies, but we found them hard to rear because Granny Lizza had two beautiful tomcats and a tortoiseshell and no matter how carefully we would lock up our pet bunnies in a strong cage, that tortoiseshell cat would find a way of making a meal of them. We gave up trying in the end. I can never see a tortoiseshell cat without remembering those days at Brungle Reserve.

When I came home from school, I would often see a number of our Aboriginal people sitting round in a circle. My mother would tell us not to go near these groups, but one day curiosity got the better of me. I found they were not doing anything exciting, only playing cards, with some money and tobacco in front of them. They were experts at playing two-up. The whole time I was there, I did not remember seeing anyone drunk.

The First World War was on, and old Granny Lizza's son had enlisted. He came home on leave in his uniform,

and I can remember we children thought he looked swell, and old Granny was so proud of him.

Sometimes in the school holidays we loved to go with Grandma Bedgie and my step-grandfather, corn picking. We had never done anything like it before, and many times we filled our tummies with that sweet juicy corn. It was grown along the river banks and so on the way to pick the corn, we would help mother take her washing to the back waters of the river. The same old thing happened—we wanted to swim, but I was older now, and saw at a glance these waters were dangerous, and we would have to keep near the bank. We two older ones could swim strongly, but we knew we were no match for these swiftly-running waters.

We got dressed to swim. The clothes had to be washed anyway. We did not dare to go out far where the current was swirling. It was not as wide as the Edwards River at Moonahculla, but very different. May and I would not leave our two younger sisters alone in these treacherous waters, but we saw Evelyn running as fast as she could into the water, not realising the danger. May grabbed her dress to hang on, but Evelyn thought it was a game and struggled to get away, laughing and yelling, and slowly dragging May out farther. Well, this story would not have been written if it had not ended well! With May and I struggling, we got Evelyn to the bank. She was nine and could swim, but not in those gay surging waters. When she realised what a narrow escape we had all had, we gave her a scolding. Mother was blissfully unaware of what was happening. Geraldine tried to tell her what had happened, but we laughed and turned it into a joke. We would not have been allowed to swim any more had she realised.

When we went corn picking with Grandmother and Step-Grandfather, a very quiet, dignified, youngish, old

man, with a beard, we would be given a long thick skewer type of implement to rip the husks away from the corn so that the corn could be broken off the stalk. Then the cobs would be put into bags. We found it fascinating at first, but our enthusiasm dwindled, and we would sneak away to the river with its body-guards of weeping willow trees, their thick, strong arms hanging over the swiftly-flowing stream. I long to go back to see it. One day I was picking the corn fast as old Step-Grandfather was encouraging us, saying we learned quickly. Grandmother smiled and encouraged us too. Suddenly I discovered all was quiet around me. I was uneasy, as I felt Mother had the unhappy knack of blaming me, the eldest, when anything went wrong. May always took the blame with me. She was a wonderful character. I heard yells of excitement from the river, and found all my cousins and sisters watching a little black figure swinging in a circle hanging onto the willow branches, high and low over the rushing river. I didn't have that kind of courage, but it looked like a lot of fun. As I watched, Grandfather came on the scene unknown to May. I remember his face to this day—it was expressionless. I felt all nerves. When May swung back to the bank, Grandfather caught and held her. Grandfather wouldn't hurt a fly, and was never known to even scold any of us, but he got a branch of the willow, a switch, and gave her a few good stinging cuts. Not only did it hurt her legs, but her heart, the deepest part. She ran sobbing into the corn field. I know how she loved this quiet old man; all we *pang pang gooks* did. We tried to find her, but couldn't. The sun was going down, and we thought of strange tribes around us. We were called for supper at our camp. It was just on dark now, and all the little sisters and cousins were saying, 'Where's May? Where's May?' We were all weeping. Old Grandfather disappeared into

the cornfield. I remember wishing I was back safe at Moonahculla or dear old Cummeragunga. I couldn't stop the tears any more. I prayed and prayed that my sister would be safe.

A tall figure emerged out of the dark into the light of the fire, which old Gran Bedgie was keeping alight, her dear black face tear-stained and troubled. She scolded the old fellow in the language as he got a plate of food and a mug of tea. Then he walked over to my side of the fire behind me. I looked around and there was May crouching in the shadows. He made us move over so that she could see to eat the food that he got her. She told me long afterwards that she had hidden when she heard us calling, but when it grew dark she became frightened of *bugenge*, the same bogeyman as at Moonahculla or *becca* at Cummeragunga. We were afraid of the wild black-fellows too, but my old aunt and uncle would say there are no wild blackfellows now. They are all pretty well tamed. Grandfather stroked May's curly head and then got his own tea again. We all went to bed huddled together, listening to the night creatures and the wild river, which we had learned to love.

When the holidays were over, we were happy to be back with our mother but we would never tell her about getting into trouble.

School again. We were taught by the daughter of the white manager of the Reserve. We really did love her. She was a good teacher, and very pretty. I was the oldest pupil in that small school on Brungle Reserve. A boy of about twelve was the next and then my sisters May and Evelyn, and a few other girls and boys of about twelve. I can remember a humiliating experience happening at that school. I was never a straight shot, and at cricket, rounders or ball games of any sort, I could never hit the target. I was dismayed and shocked one day when a young lad laughed

and teased me about getting an easy sum wrong. Peter was a nice boy, the favourite of teachers and pupils, and I was not really mad with him, but I told him I would hit him with something. He teased me a little more, and to make good my threat, I picked up the first thing I could see, a small playing block with pictures on it. I meant to throw it to one side of him, but being such a rotten shot, I hit him fair and square on the head. We all got a fright at his piercing screams. I would have cheerfully let him slap my face to make amends. I will never forget the horror of that lovely teacher having to give me the cane. I felt I was an untouchable. After school my sisters told my mother, who told me what she felt about such behaviour. I went into our little room and shut the door and wept until I couldn't weep any more. Peter was my best mate.

I said I didn't want to go to school any more after that, but Mother firmly saw to it that I went. But I kept to myself, and wouldn't join in the games. I felt a deep shame and took a great interest in my lessons, unconsciously trying to make amends. I was too ashamed to go near Peter. However, one day he came to school, his usual cheerful self. He had some lollies, a luxury for us kids. He gave one to all the others. I walked outside and sat on the edge of the verandah of the school pretending to read a book. I was so full of my own feelings that I did not hear footsteps.

'I saved two of the best lollies for you, Margaret.' Peter said.

All I could say was, 'Peter, I didn't mean to hit you.'

'I know, come on inside.'

Our wise, pretty teacher smiled, and all was forgotten. But I have not forgotten the lesson! I believe Peter has passed on now, but he will always be in my thoughts, because he showed me what forgiveness meant.

The thought that I was the only girl of my age at that

The Murray River at Cummeragunga, looking downstream across to the Victorian bank. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

Nkuppa Taylor and one of his daughters in 1898. He was Hubert Day's grandfather. Hubert has lent many of the photographs for this book.

The Aboriginal Mission at Warrangasda, where I was born. (From *Aboriginal Life in Australia,* J.B. Gribb, London, 1884; courtesy National Library of Australia.)

One of the few houses left in Warrangasda. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

The church in Warrangasda is now used as a hay barn. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

Settlement was troubling me. I overheard my grandmother talking with my mother about the so-called Aborigines Protection Board, which had the policy of taking all the girls who reached the age of twelve or thirteen to the Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls at Cootamundra. Neglected boys and girls were also taken there. The boys were to be trained as stockmen and in other farm work, but they could have learned this on the stations and farms around, without being taken from their parents. Our Aboriginal families lived in constant fear, especially the parents. When we were naughty, Mother would say, 'I will get the *connichman* to take you to the Home if you don't stop.' She didn't spare the rod though, so such a threat did not worry us much. We knew what it was to get a good hard whacking on our tails. It was a normal happening in many families.

One day we were allowed to go home early from school. When we got home, the house was very tidy, in fact all the homes were extra tidy. Rubbish had gone. We were made to wash and brush up. The Aborigines Protection Board members were coming. I can remember how pleased and proud Mother and Father were to hear them say what lovely little girls they had, how nicely kept, everything so scrupulously clean; could the two older girls go for training in that beautiful training school at Cootamundra, where they would be well cared for and trained to be domestics and earn a living? They would love being there in the beautiful surroundings, the lovely gardens with fruit trees. My father and mother were listening. Mother told them that while it sounded all right, she felt that the neglected children with no parents needed to be cared for, not our family, who were happy. My father's younger sister, four years older than I, had been taken (we had never seen her), and others from parents on Brungle and elsewhere. The parents fretted to

see their children and the children longed to see their home, even if it were only a *mia-mia*, or a shack. As long as they were with their beloved bush people and in their own surroundings they were happy.

We were terrified at the thought of being separated from our parents, and while we listened fear and suspicion grew in our hearts. I edged nearer to Father, who I felt for the first time really belonged to us and would help my mother protect us. My father and mother were fighting to keep us together as a family. I realised now why there were few girls or boys of my age at the Settlement. Most had been taken away to be trained, never to be seen for many years. My auntie had been taken from her grandmother and many parents did not see their children for years. Some of the children died fretting for home. Home was their people. We suffered hunger and sometimes sorrow in our homes, but we were together, free to go walkabout, to hunt and to learn at school. These Board members were insistent on having us, but Father said, 'No,' he wanted us home and could keep us. Mother, to end this frightening conversation said, 'We will think about it.'

When I look back on it, I do feel that our people needed to be taught to be self-supporting. Colour at that time was not an issue. We accepted white people, station owners, homesteaders, as part of our life. We worked for them for our food, because *our* game, our food in earlier days, had been shot, or had gone away when fences were erected. Colour was not an issue, but other things were happening that meant a proud race was deteriorating and being made to feel inferior.

Father had to go back to work, as the shearing season had begun. Mother's health was not too good and I feel now that she did not feel secure on her own, since the visit of the Aborigines Protection Board members. So,

when Father sent money home to Brungle to us, Mother packed up, and took us all except my sister Evelyn, who was a great favourite with Grandmother. Mother left her, intending to get her later. She didn't have enough money for one more fare. We travelled from Gundagai to Finley, sleeping all night under the gum trees. Next morning a white lady saw us from her home, and came over and asked my mother to please come and bring her little girls to have a wash and be refreshed and have breakfast. Mother told her we were waiting for the mail coach to travel to Deniliquin and on to dear old Moonahculla. I will always remember that lady in Finley.

We returned from Brungle to our Aboriginal people's place. No matter how little food we had or how difficult life was, we loved our Settlement at Moonahculla. We arrived home and old Aunt and Uncle were overjoyed to see us, not minding that they had four more mouths to feed. Moonahculla had no beautiful hills, not many rabbits, no free milk in the mornings as we had had in Brungle. It was winter in this drab bit of country, where the nearest town was twenty-five miles away over boggy roads, where one couldn't see the green grass for the white frost in the mornings. If it was our bad luck to have no water in the buckets, we would have to go down to the river to get a billy of water, our footmarks making all kinds of patterns on that snow-white frost. Some poor children cried with frost-bitten tootsies.

Well, I cannot describe the joy we felt, being back with old Auntie and Uncle and girls and boys of our own age. We didn't fret for the comforts of Brungle, but we did fret for our sister, but Mother comforted us and said we would see her again, and at least she would be getting plenty of food, and Gran would care for her. We wrote to the old grandmother and sister, and we didn't feel so bad when we got letters back. I didn't realise it would be nine

years before we saw her again.

I was now thirteen and tall for my age. Mother was trying to teach me, without making it too obvious, that I was growing up. Thinking back, I remember some of the pitfalls of that time. One day I was riding my boy-cousin's bike. I hadn't seen a bike for twelve months and I was so thrilled riding round that little Settlement, my dress and black hair flying in the wind. One of our favourite missionaries waved me to a stop, for a talk. What she said to me ever so gently and wisely made me embarrassed and my dusky face grew hot. I hated her at that moment for showing me I was no longer a child, and that I must wear coverings underneath.

With my black eyes indignant I pulled up my dress, and showed her I was wearing pants. My mother would have waled into me if I hadn't been. But Mother was away, working at her old homestead job at Morago, over the river. Old Aunt was fishing up the river, and would be back any moment. I felt a sense of guilt and discomfort, but at the same time wondering why, because I had ridden the bike around many times before.

When Mother lengthened my dresses as befitted an older girl, I was vaguely miserable. It seemed as though I was growing apart from May. My wise old Aunt said little but dropped wise little remarks.

Our games together with older boys became exciting, but innocent, chasing games, with a little fear in them, which I did not understand. It seems strange now, that we were so innocent of the facts of life.

Both at Moonahculla and later at Cummeragunga, we were reared by grand people with Christian principles, like my mother, and Aunt and Uncle. I cannot remember any suggestive or smutty words spoken. There were a few swear words, not really bad, but thought terrible by us children. We would run home and tell the family, who

would caution us never to repeat such things. I often wonder about the high moral standards of our elders. They were not saints, but they tried to keep sordidness away from us, and to preserve our dignity, realising perhaps that we were in danger of becoming a dying race.

When occasionally an unmarried girl became pregnant, the father of that child was rounded up, and more often than not there was a willing marriage. These wedding feasts I remember as though it were yesterday.

Aboriginal women could cook, and everyone would have a hand in making such a wedding celebration a joyous occasion. Mother would have a part in making the wedding dress. No one would see it until the bride wore it on her wedding day. The couple would be driven separately to Deniliquin. We always chose a good season for the wedding, not a rainy one. The marriage would be performed early in the morning, then a twenty-five mile drive back to Moonahculla. A shack would be built for their home, by friendly hands, and made comfortable by gifts that could or couldn't be spared, to help them on their way. The wedding feast would be held in a long green bough shed, freshly made for the occasion. I can still smell the heavenly fresh gum leaves, mingling with wild flowers and garden flowers, given by kindly squatters and nearby farmers. There were beautiful white starched cloths adorning the tables, which were made from doors lent from different homes. Short poles were cut from the bush and stuck into the ground to hold up the tables. Then split posts made forms to sit on, all round the tables. The children had their own little corner nearby. Some of the mothers with small babies would sit with them, and keep law and order in their own fashion. Every family on that Reserve would contribute something to the feast, and believe me, in our people's opinion it was second to none.

Granny Maggie Ross, who was the great-great-grandmother of the world-renowned boxer, Lionel Rose, would bring snow-white tablecloths, and a hamper full of home-made cakes and sandwiches to add to the other contributions. Fruit in season would be given from surrounding orchards or bought with generous gifts of money scraped up for the occasion. Fish would be cooked in many ways, and, using the old underground method for the large game, swans, emu and kangaroos were cooked to a luscious tenderness. There would be potatoes and other vegetables and sometimes the gift of a sheep from a neighbouring farmer. Precious rice was sacrificed to throw over the bride and groom, white man's way—what a waste! We children would look in wonder at the bride in her pretty dress, with lace and ribbon trimmings—how beautiful she looked!

I don't think I can remember how the grooms looked, poor fellows! After the feast was over, believe it or not, a violin and a concertina would come to light. There were Uncle Jack Ingram, old Uncle's younger brother, and old Uncle Billy Edmond, a Victorian from Healesville who married old Uncle's daughter. He played the concertina, and my! he was wonderful with that instrument. One of the Coopers played the violin. The rollicking dance tunes from that little Aboriginal three-man band, and others playing gum leaves, was something to remember. Jack Brown and Dinny Myers would do the step dance on one of the old doors laid flat on the ground. After every item the yells of delight would have lifted the roof off if there had been a roof, but all this merriment and jollification took place under the stars. The highlight would be when a few would do the corroboree. Sometimes the white bosses would come. When Jack Brown finished his step dancing, Mrs Armstrong, the boss's wife from a neighbouring station, got on to the old

door and went for her life doing the step dancing. After she had finished you could hear the Aborigines' yells of delight and encores for miles around. A white boss's wife dancing at an Aboriginal wedding feast! After seeing those old dances, sets, lancers, we would be promenading up and down every chance we got for weeks after.

Those Aboriginal musicians were asked to play for white men's socials and dances. You may think it is strange our Aboriginal people picking up the white people's instruments and playing their music, when their own singing and harmonising was natural. Now white youths are playing the didgeridoo!

I sometimes wonder if our culture taught to white youths as well as our Aboriginal youths today, would bring white and dark Australians together. I know that up the top end of Australia the culture of our people is being saved to some extent, although I realise that alcohol, the white man's poison, is taking its toll. I read in the newspapers today that Aboriginal girls twelve years old and upwards are being 'used' at certain mining areas. Their babies, who do not have a say in what colour they are, are called half-caste or part-Aborigine. I have faith that name will be dropped and that we all will have the right to claim whatever identity we wish. White people have many different nationalities in their inheritance too. I am always saying that colour is not the issue, it is character that counts.

CHAPTER SEVEN

At Moonahculla we had a white manager, Mr Hill, who doubled as a school teacher as well, until his wife joined him, and then she taught us. We were fascinated with her glorious red hair, and my, her temper was fiery to match it! I didn't blame her. We were a lively, mischievous lot, and she didn't spare the rod. She didn't cane us, but switched our bare feet under the desks. The boys copped it mostly. I felt sorry for her sometimes because the boys would put their feet up under the desks where she would have a hard job hitting them. Her face, poor lady, would be so cross. However, we had a great respect for her. But her husband caused many a giggle amongst us when he tried to learn the language, which a couple of the boys were eager to teach him. We older girls were too shy to tell this white manager that the boys were teaching him

wrong meanings and fighting words, but he soon found out. One day he was airing these Aboriginal words to a group of Aboriginal women. He was so pleased to be able to say something in their language. A couple of the younger women giggled; some turned their backs on him, and walked away. The old aunt then asked him who had taught him these words, knowing that he would not have used them if he had known what they meant. She did not beat about the bush. She told him he was swearing. I can remember her saying she could guess who taught him those words. And so could we all. As Mr Hill strode away, we knew the boys would be in for a hot time. When the boys heard their parents talking about the incident they wisely kept out of the white manager's way.

Our youngest sister Geraldine had the misfortune to fall on a jagged piece of wooden stump, which created a nasty wound that needed hospital treatment. Old Uncle and Aunt harnessed up the horse and drove to Deniliquin. Little sister was put into hospital, Auntie and Uncle camping on the bank of the Edwards River, so they could visit her until she was ready to leave hospital.

Mother was working at Old Morago homestead, and we were in the care of a near relation, who saw that we did not want for anything and that we did not miss school. But no matter how much we loved these relations, we fretted and wondered how our little sister was getting on, and wished that our uncle and aunt or Mother were home. We little knew that in fact May and I would not see either our little sister or our uncle and aunt for many years.

A week went by. We were still with the relation, who was old Uncle's daughter from his first marriage. The daughter had about seven children, some older than us and some about the same age. We were very fond of that

family and looked upon the McGees as our nearest relatives on Moonahculla. They had a beautiful flower garden and vegetables too in season. But they had to put a fence around to keep out the goats, stray horses and cattle.

One day when we were at school I was thrilled because an older boy and I were the only ones to get the answer to a difficult sum. Mrs Hill praised us and as I am not brainy it really meant a lot to me. Between morning school and the lunch break, we heard the unmistakable sound of a motor car. Out where we were motor cars were very rare at that time, and although we were seething with curiosity, we did not dare to move from our desks. One or two ventured to ask if they could leave the room, but were not allowed. Our schoolmistress was called outside. She cautioned us not to move until she returned. Some of the boys got on the desks and took a peep through the window. They relayed to us what was going on outside. A policeman and a young man and Mr Hill were talking together. Mrs Hill came in for a minute, but did not take any notice of the few boys who she must surely have seen jumping down from the window. She seemed very upset. She called Eric Briggs and Osley McGee and spoke quietly to them. They left the school through the back door. I cannot remember everything that went on, but the next thing I do remember was that the policeman and Mr Hill came into the school. Mrs Hill seemed to be in a heated argument with her husband. She was very distressed.

The children were all standing (we always stood up when visitors came and the police were no exception). My sister May and another little girl, an orphan, started to cry. Then others. They may have heard the conversation. I was puzzled to know what they were crying for, until Mr Hill told all the children to leave the school,

except myself and May and Myrtle Taylor, who was the same age as May (eleven years). Myrtle was an orphan reared by Mrs Maggie Briggs. She was very fair-skinned and pretty.

I had forgotten about Brungle and the gang of men representing the Aborigines Protection Board who had visited when we were staying there. But then it came to me in a rush! But I didn't believe for a moment that my mother would let us go. She would put a stop to it! All the children who had been dismissed must have run home and told their parents what was happening at school. When I looked out that schoolroom door, every Moonahculla Aboriginal mother—some with babies in arms—and a sprinkling of elderly men were standing in groups. Most of the younger men were away working on homesteads and sheep stations or farms. Then I started to cry. There were forty or fifty of our people standing silently grieving for us. They knew something treacherous was going on, something to break our way of life. They could not see ahead to the white man's world. We simply accepted the whites as a superior race. Around that particular part of Australia, I feel we were fortunate in having a kindly lot of white station owners.

Then suddenly that little group were all talking at once, some in the language, some in English, but all with a hopelessness, knowing they would not have the last say. Some looked very angry, others had tears running down their cheeks. Then Mr Hill demanded that we three girls leave immediately with the police. The Aboriginal women were very angry.

Mr Hill was in a situation he had never experienced before. He did not take into account that Aboriginal hearts could break down with despair and helplessness, the same as any other human hearts. Mrs Hill, the tears running down her cheeks, made a valiant attempt to

prolong our stay. I did not realise she had sent our two radicals Eric and Osley to race the mile and a half to get our mother. I will never forget her for that. She stood her ground, against her husband, the police and the driver of the car. 'Well, they can't go without something to eat, and it is lunch time,' she said, in a determined way.

'No thank you Teacher, we are not hungry,' we said.

'All the same, you children are not going that long journey (first to Deniliquin, then many more miles to Finley, where we would catch the train to Cootamundra) without food,' she insisted.

She went out to her house at the side of the school, taking as long as she dared to prepare something to eat. Her husband, his face going purple, was looking at his watch every few minutes. At last she came in with a tray with glasses of milk and the kind of food we only got at Christmastime. We said we couldn't eat it—we were not hungry—but she coaxed us to drink the milk and eat something. Mr Hill couldn't stand it any longer and said a lot of time was being wasted, and that the police and the driver wanted to leave.

We started to cry again and most of our school mates and the mothers too, when our mother, like an angel, came through the schoolroom door. Little Myrtle's auntie rushed in too.

I thought: 'Everything will be right now. Mum won't let us go.'

Myrtle was grabbed up by her auntie. We had our arms round our mother, and refused to let go. She still had her apron on, and must have run the whole one and a half miles. She arrived just in time, due to the kindness of Mrs Hill. As we hung onto our mother she said fiercely, 'They are my children and they are not going away with you.'

The policeman, who no doubt was doing his duty,

patted his handcuffs, which were in a leather case on his belt, and which May and I thought was a revolver.

'Mrs Clements,' he said, 'I'll have to use this if you do not let us take these children now.'

Thinking that policeman would shoot Mother, because she was trying to stop him, we screamed, 'We'll go with him Mum, we'll go.' I cannot forget any detail of that moment, it stands out as though it were yesterday. I cannot ever see kittens taken from their mother cat without remembering that scene. It is just on sixty years ago.

However, the policeman must have had a heart, because he allowed my mother to come in the car with us as far as Deniliquin. She had no money, and took nothing with her, only the clothes she had on. Then the policeman sprang another shock. He said he had to go to the hospital to pick up Geraldine, who was to be taken as well. The horror on my mother's face and her heart-broken cry! I tried to reason why all this was happening to us, and tried not to think.

All my mother could say was, 'Oh, no, not my Baby, please let me have her. I will look after her.'

As that policeman walked up the hospital path to get my little sister, May and Myrtle and I sobbed quietly. Mother got out of the car and stood waiting with a hopeless look. Her tears had run dry I guess. I thought to myself, I will gladly go, if they will only leave Geraldine with Mother.

'Mrs Clements, you can have your little girl. She left the hospital this morning,' said the policeman.

Mother simply took that policeman's hand and kissed it and said, 'Thank you, thank you.'

Then we were taken to the police station, where the policeman no doubt had to report. Mother followed him, thinking she could beg once more for us, only to rush out

when she heard the car start up. My last memory of her for many years was her waving pathetically, as we waved back and called out goodbye to her, but we were too far away for her to hear us.

I heard years later how after watching us go out of her life, she wandered away from the police station three miles along the road leading out of the town to Moonahculla. She was worn out, with no food or money, her apron still on. She wandered off the road to rest in the long grass under a tree. That is where old Uncle and Aunt found her the next day. They had arrived back with Geraldine from the Deniliquin hospital and they were at once surrounded by our people at Moonahculla, who told them the whole story. Someone immediately offered the loan of a fresh horse to go back and find Mother. They found our mother still moaning and crying. They heard the sounds and thought it was an animal in pain. Uncle stopped the horse and got out of the buggy to investigate. Auntie heard him talking in the language. She got down and rushed to old Uncle's side. Mother was half demented and ill. They gave her water and tried to feed her, but she couldn't eat. She was not interested in anything for weeks, and wouldn't let Geraldine out of her sight. She slowly got better, but I believe for months after, at the sight of a policeman's white helmet coming round the bend of the river, she would grab her little girl and escape into the bush, as did all the Aboriginal people who had children.

When these happenings reached the ears of the farmers and homesteaders, they got together and protested I believe. They got an assurance that Mother and Geraldine would be left alone. Mother was highly respected in the district. The love and care of all the Aboriginal people on the Settlement, especially of old Aunt and Uncle, and her own courage, helped her back

to her old self, 'up and doing', as she had so often said to us.

I often wonder how many black children were taken like that.

At Cummeragunga and old Maloga, the haunts of my mother and old Aunt, and where I had most of my education under Mr James, who taught us the white man's ABC, the same thing happened. Young girls were taken by force, especially when our Aboriginal fathers and young men were away working. At Cummeragunga a few girls of thirteen and fourteen swam the Murray River to escape onto the Victorian side. I believe a policeman resigned from the force saying if it was a policeman's job to tear crying children from heart-broken mothers, he did not want the job.

Some girls did not ever return. At Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls, little Coralie Allen was isolated from the rest of us, because she had TB, an illness that killed a lot of our people, both at Moonahculla and at Cummeragunga. She used to beg to have her bed near the other girls. She was afraid to be on her own. We would hear her saying pitifully, 'Please Matron, I'll be a good girl. I won't be naughty.' Matron Rutter, for whom I had a great respect, would talk to her and tell her she was a good little girl and not a naughty one, and would go on to explain that she was kept away from us because we would disturb and worry her, as she was also a sick little girl. Then we would hear Matron telling her a couple of little stories. I don't remember whether she was there very long, but I do know she was one of the girls who didn't see her people again.

Our people started moving to other places, ancestral grounds such as around Kerang, Wakool, Barham, Koondrook, Moulamein, Balranald, Swan Hill. Some went to the Settlement at Cummeragunga, some to

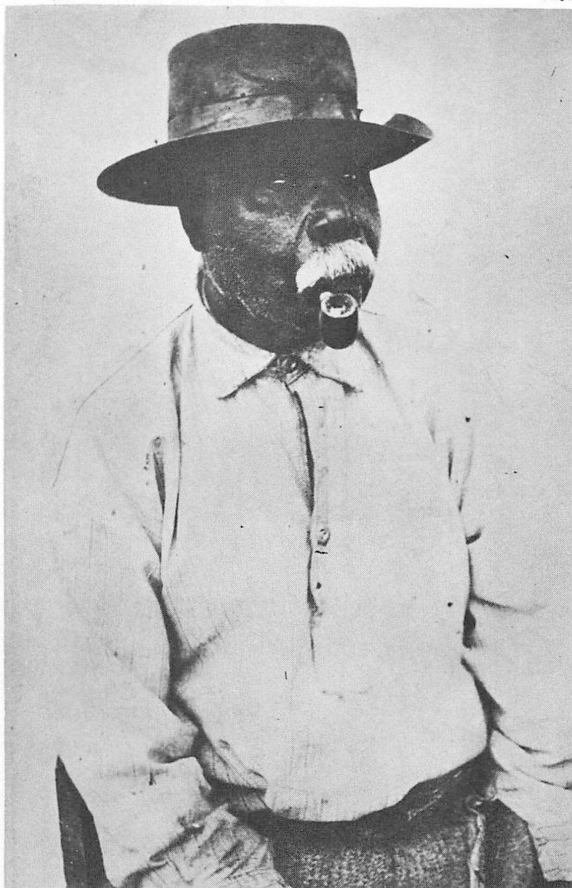
Warrangasda. They roamed all over the place along the Murray River, the Edwards and the Murrumbidgee, and other rivers where our old tribes had roamed generations before.

Hay bales inside the old church.
(Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

The old church. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

Above: A picture of me (standing at the back) with (from left to right) May, Geraldine and Evelyn.

Right: Alec MacCoy, the old man who caught and cooked the goanna.



An Aboriginal woman with her baby wrapped in skins. (Courtesy National Library of Australia.)

Swimming and fishing in the river was a favourite pastime of our tribes everywhere. (Courtesy National Library of Australia.)

CHAPTER EIGHT

When May, Myrtle and I arrived at the Cootamundra railway station in the care of Mr Hill, we were amazed to see standing on the platform Father and Uncle Ernie Clements. May and I ran to them, thinking now we would be all right. I will never know how they knew we would be arriving by that train. But our joy was short-lived. A policeman was there to meet us also, and a horse-drawn cab.

The Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls was, I believe, a hospital before it became the Home. It had a long, wide, big room in the centre, with rows of beds each side and a row of beds end to end up the middle of the room. It was embarrassing the first night. I didn't have a nightgown or any clothes to speak of, as we had not been allowed to go home to pack our things before

we were brought to the Home.

There was another long room called the dormitory with about half a dozen beds, and another with more beds. It's so long ago, I cannot quite remember the layout. I do remember the quarters of the Matron and Assistant Matron leading into the end of the dormitory. There were about thirty girls, but different ones came and went all the time, and we had to fit into this family. Those who were already there gave us the low-down on what was what. Matron was a good sort and the girls told us her bark was worse than her bite, but the Assistant Matron was very bad tempered. She was a tall, well-built woman, and I thought rather pretty. Her name was Miss Wood. She was in charge of the meals and each week taught two different girls cooking. Most of the girls were too scared of her to concentrate, and were very relieved when their week was up. She only showed you how to do something once, and expected you to remember.

There was a school in the grounds, and we three attended the first day, but I was kept from school the next day because I was too big. The officials called me the overgrown fourteen-year-old. I protested and said my mother ought to know. However, that was the last time I went to school. I think I was thirteen years and four months.

The first morning we couldn't eat the porridge that was given to us for breakfast. You may think it strange, seeing food had never been plentiful on the Moonahculla Settlement despite the fact that the men were always away working hard as stockmen, drovers, shearers and doing lamb marking in season. But this porridge was a strange brown colour and sugar was rationed. However, the other girls begged us to give it to them, and as I watched them finish our porridge, they explained no one was allowed a second helping of anything. They also

told us that we would be glad to eat what was put before us in a day or so. As we marched into our meals and sang Grace, the girls would sometimes beg each other for their share in exchange for something precious such as a keepsake from home—a postcard or a piece of ribbon. Sometimes a girl would pinch the food off the plate of the girl next to her. Then there would be tears and a brawl, but a quiet one, in case Miss Wood or Matron would hear us.

When the Protection Board visited the Home, which they did every now and then, some would speak to the girls and ask how they were getting on. One or two would speak up and say we didn't get enough to eat. At that, the men would say it couldn't be true, because the food bill for the Home was enormous.

I hadn't been at the Home for very long before I was chosen with Beatrice Buggs, a girl a little older than I, to take my turn in the kitchen with Miss Wood for the week. For three or four days we managed to get by, until she tried to teach us how to bake and ice a cake. Well—try to imagine our position! Aboriginal girls coming from camp life, no stoves, only open fires or a three-legged camp oven in which everything was cooked from a roast to a dish called sea pie. This pie had a lovely crust on it, and my aunt and mother used to be experts at it, and also sweets like rice or sago pudding, and the very rare plum pudding. That was boiled in a kerosene tin, a large one that was washed out till it was free from the taste and smell of kerosene. Damper was cooked in the ashes and dusted with clean leaves from gum tree suckers. It would come out as clean and perfectly cooked as scones from a modern oven, where you can regulate the heat. But of course you had to have a technique and know-how to regulate the heat on an open fire! It was rarely that our people in these Settlements had two meals a day, other

than a slice of damper with or without dripping; sometimes with treacle and, less often, with golden syrup, which we enjoyed. If we were lucky enough to get a rabbit or a piece of meat, it would be put into the biggest pot we had with an onion or potato, sometimes cadged from someone else on the Settlement. Salt was never hard to come by. Thickened with flour and cooked slowly, that soup with a spoonful of meat was the most delicious concoction you ever tasted. We children got used to not knowing where the next meal was coming from.

It was pretty obvious, then, why two Aboriginal girls and the others at the Home couldn't be expected to understand the cooking of white people, disciplined meals—we who were children of the bush!

Beatrice Buggs and I got belted up that first time for not remembering things such as essence of vanilla, and essence of this and that. It was the first time we had been introduced to the bewildering array of canisters and tins in cupboards in that kitchen. I remember my mate Beatrice's bleeding lips and bruised cheeks. She was slightly bigger than I was. I cowed in the corner terrified as I watched Miss Wood wield a good-sized piece of firewood, her face red and awful-looking. Poor Beatrice, I will never forget it and what it led to.

Matron was upset when she came into the kitchen. The girls were standing around far enough away so they would not be involved. They were terrified and some were crying. Matron broke it up with difficulty. Miss Wood was like a mad person. As soon as we could slip through the kitchen door, I remember clutching Beatrice's arm and finding a place to hide where Miss Wood couldn't get to us.

Matron's way of punishing naughty girls was different and more lenient. Once she was conducting Sunday

School. We were all assembled in the hall of the dining room. Two or three of the girls were restless and playing up. They were called out by Matron and made to stand with their faces turned to the wall. Matron went on with her talk, but we could not concentrate on the story, because one of the girls supposed to be facing the wall behind Matron kept turning round and grimacing. Finding encouragement from the girls who started to giggle, she started to finger lightly Matron's long white veil. Matron turned round suddenly, and the veil was pulled off by the girl, who looked terrified. Matron was outraged. She got hold of that girl, bent her over her knee, lifted her dress, and belted her with her bare hand. I don't know which was the sorest, Matron's hand or the girl's bottom. We all felt sorry for the girl's humiliation although she had been naughty.

We got used to accepting our fate, although May, Myrtle and I would often get homesick. We would go to a quiet corner of the building to talk about home and our family. We would wonder when we would see them again. We would have a good old cry and get the homesickness out of our systems for a while anyway. There were many lonely little girls without a sister or cousin, so the bigger girls would unofficially adopt one as a sister. I can remember how pathetically these little ones would love to be included.

We were all accepting that ahead was the unknown—just as well we did not know.

The night after Miss Wood's attack on Beatrice, the older girls gathered together and had what you might call a consultation. The outcome was that nine of us decided to run away. The thought of going into that kitchen again with Miss Wood, that big woman who belted us, was too much. We were not brave and our courage had petered out. We crept in to say goodbye to

our sisters and friends when we thought Matron and Miss Wood were asleep, and things were quiet. May and Myrtle and little Lillian Foster, who we had chosen to take under our wing and care for, wept.

The nine of us threw our boots out the high window and grabbed a blanket each (to keep us warm on the winter nights). We were wearing printed blouses, long, ugly grey winceyette skirts, and thick, unsightly woollen stockings. We collected our boots under the window. Someone either did not throw out their boots or couldn't find them in the dark. I can remember squeezing on a pair that I realised weren't mine; someone else must have taken mine.

Mary Hickey said 'Someone has my boots, I think you have them Margaret.'

Although her boots were hurting me like the very dickens, I said, 'No, they are mine.'

However, after limping half a mile or so, I couldn't stand it any longer and became grudgingly honest.

'I think they must be yours, Mary.'

Then someone said a strip off the end of one of the blankets would make a covering for my feet and this turned out to be better than nothing.

We walked a long way that night. An older girl called Diddi (I think her real name was Ella Murray) was a sort of leader of the group. Some of us were getting tired and thirsty and hungry. We drew lots to see who would cadge something to eat from the next farmhouse. We didn't know what time it was when we came to a cottage where there was a dim light burning. The dogs began to bark. The three girls chosen quickly stuffed some of their belongings down their blouses. The man who came to the door said his wife had gone to hospital to have their baby. The girls told him a story of how they were travelling and were short of food. Seeing Georgina

Barlow with her blouse stuffed, his curiosity got the better of him and he rubbed his hand down the front of her blouse. She bolted back, the other two close on her heels. That was the end of that.

We all had a raging thirst. It must have been one or two o'clock in the morning. We saw a waterhole, where sheep and horses drank I suppose. We got down on our stomachs and took a drink. Diddi told us not to drink too much. We spread out our blankets under a tree to have a little rest. We must have gone to sleep but were awakened by the snorting and tramping of some huge draught horses. Diddi was yelling to us to get up quickly. We grabbed our blankets and belongings and made for the fence we had got through a little earlier. Diddi said it was best to keep walking. I still had my blanket slippers but one was more like a flipper for it was coming undone and flapping on the ground as I walked. I developed dreadful pains that made me cry. I thought it must be the water I had drunk, which must have been full of tadpoles. Two of my mates got each side of me and helped me along. Diddi said, 'Keep walking, it might go away,' which it did.

I don't know how long we were walking in the direction of Mutama, where my Uncle Ernie Clements worked, about twelve miles from Cootamundra. We reached Mutama about sunrise. We followed the railway line, and although we were tired and hungry we liked the countryside. It was lambing season and the playful little creatures were everywhere. We were concerned for one little lamb that had been born in the mouth of a rabbit burrow. It tried every way to get its hind quarters out of that burrow, but it was stuck. The mother was bleating piteously. Diddi said we could kill it, and grill it on a fire, but even though we were so hungry, we were all horrified at her suggestion. The ground was so hard we could not dig it out with sharp

sticks. Diddi said we must let someone know. However it was not necessary. A man on horseback came riding towards us. We told him about the lamb, but he didn't seem to be worrying about it. He was more interested in us, and asked us if we came from that school on the side of the hill in Cootamundra. We told him we were just travelling. However, he told us word had been sent to all the farms and homesteads that nine girls had run away, and asked us to follow him back to his house, where we could have a nice breakfast.

That finished us—we were hungry and tired. I was embarassed with my blanketed feet, and tried to hide behind the other girls, but it was difficult. We got to his house, and sure enough his good wife had hot scones and plenty of jam and butter and milky tea. I felt anything was better than running away. I had had it, my feet were sore. And judging by the looks on the faces of the other girls, they were ready to give up and go back to face the music. The gentleman took the nine of us by car and sulky to the little railway station of Mutama, where we got in the train back to Cootamundra. The fellows at the railway station there had a sense of humour. They were calling out 'Welcome to the Runaways' as we got out of the train. There was the policeman and Miss Wood and a horse-drawn cab waiting for us. We were lined up. I tried to hide my feet, but it was no use. Miss Wood pointed me out and said, 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself Margaret' and my word, I was! We were all locked up in different parts of the home. Beatrice and I had a bathroom each, with a leaden-looking floor and one blanket. It was freezing and a frightening experience, because we all believed in ghosts. We were given dry bread and water as a punishment.

A month or so passed and we settled down again and tried to accept our lot.

One day, Matron Rutter sent for Beatrice and me. We found her sitting in the sewing room with piles of material, some brown and some other colours.

We were measured and fitted. I thought we were going to have some new clothes and I thought anything would be better than the old winceyette skirts and those print blouses. When we told the other girls, who were very curious and wondering why we had been summoned into Matron's quarters, their eyes grew wide, 'Oh you lucky things, you are going away to service!'

May and Myrtle started to cry, and I felt unhappy, because we were to be parted again. I did not realise that May was delicate and sensitive and fretted so much for home. I was glad though that she and Myrtle would remain together. I didn't know that Myrtle would be sent quite soon to what the girls spoke of as a 'white home'. Myrtle was very fair and pretty, a shy little girl with a beautiful singing voice. We would coax her to sing when we were all together in a quiet spot.

Beatrice and I were to be sent out to situations. The excitement of just us two travelling in the train on our own to Sydney! The year was 1919. As I sit and think now, my thoughts run back to the parting with May. It was the third parting for her, first from her loved ones at Moonahculla, then when I ran away from the Home and now again when I left to go to Sydney. I was selfishly delighted to get away from the Home, and only gave a passing thought to May, who I thought would be all right because she and Myrtle were together. But she was not all right. I found out she was very sick after I left. Myrtle seemed to be all right and was sent to that 'white home' the girls had spoken of, but that was the last straw for my sister May. I have often wondered how many of these girls fretted like May. I also wonder how many descendants of these fair-skinned Aboriginal children ever returned to

their Aboriginal relatives. I wonder how many have forgotten that they came from black people who married into white, thus wiping out their inheritance without knowing it.

Many would be brainwashed probably into thinking colour did matter, and character didn't. I shall never cease to be grateful to the sincere Christian people who showed me through the way they lived that it is not colour that counts; character is the most important issue.

When Beatrice and I arrived at Sydney railway station two policemen took us to the police station. It was early morning. The day-shift police came in and we were put into the care of one and taken to the Protection Board's office, where our mistresses were to call and collect us. That was the last I saw of Beatrice. (Jim Berg, who is a dedicated worker for the Aborigines, is a descendant of Beatrice. His wife is a leader in many Aboriginal organisations.)

The young constable left us. We were not even offered a cup of tea after that long journey from Cootamundra. When Beatrice left with her mistress my heart was heavy. I was on my own in this big city with white people who I had never lived with before. A deep loneliness settled on me. I was scared for the first time. Although I did not know the first thing about the way white people lived, I began to realise that a lot would be expected of me.

My mistress came to collect me. My heart lifted a bit because she was rather pretty. (I thought every white lady was pretty who wore pretty clothes.) She greeted me in a friendly way and told me she would not be taking me home right away, but that I would stay at a private hospital to look after the baby boy, aged about twelve months. He was ill and was missing the last Aboriginal nurse girl who he had loved and whose place I was taking. My mistress told me the Aboriginal girl was very pretty. I

was overjoyed at the thought of the baby. We loved all babies and I was sure this baby would love me too.

I was taken to sit beside this little fellow in his cot. He was a beautiful child, but he did not take any notice of me, and I just sat there and fingered his toys. I cannot remember how many days I was there, but eventually the baby was taken home, and I went with him. There I met his two older sisters, Mauvely, three, and Elizabeth, nearly five. I was painfully shy—especially of the master of the house, who was English and a gentleman.

CHAPTER NINE

I CANNOT QUITE RECALL every detail of those first few days in Beecroft Road, Cheltenham. The trains ran down beyond the bottom of the garden fence to and fro from suburbs and country to the city of Sydney, meeting up with other trains from other cities. How I longed to be in one of them taking me back to my people!

I am sure it must have been difficult to teach me the way to care for that beautiful home, in which I did not have one scrap of interest. I cannot imagine how I got through the first few weeks and months. I was confused, shy, and fretted for my people. At first I was used mostly as a nurse girl, which made me feel more at ease. After a while I was trusted to mind the baby boy out in the big garden. Actually the children helped me through the heart-breaking loneliness. It is a natural instinct for Aborigines

to love children, and so I was happier when I was with those three lovable little ones. And they were all my shadows. Elizabeth was highly-strung and chattered incessantly, liking to boss the show. As she grew older she recognised that I was a servant for her benefit, but I was the first one she would run to for comfort if she were hurt. She really was a lovely little girl. Mauvely was an adorable child and I felt she sensed when I was homesick, because she would toddle around with me as I weeded the garden or fed the chooks.

The little boy and I were inseparable. I carried him here and there until he learned to toddle. As well as looking after the children, I learned to do all sorts of work—mainly outside: garden work, feeding the poultry, mixing their food. There were chicks and ducklings hatched by incubator. When I dug the weeds in the garden with my hand-fork or trowel, I had the ducklings scrambling over my hands gobbling up the worms. It would be great fun for me, and the children would all giggle with me. The ducklings were kept in the tool shed at night. They would nestle up together, such pretty, fluffy little things, till one morning there was a tragedy and we found some of them mutilated by rats. The big shed had an earthen floor and the boss and his wife searched for those wretched rat holes. When they found the holes, they poured kettles of boiling water down them. Out came the jumping, screaming rats. I don't know who screamed most, the lady or the rats. Mr Smith had to go to the rescue and kill the rats with an iron bar, so they didn't scream any more. I was glad, as I felt it was a cruel way to kill anything. Later on they bought some tins of stuff that looked like white ointment. It was called *Rough on Rats.* They spread it on slices of bread, cut them into squares, and put some into each hole. The tin of *Rough on Rats* was then put high up on a shelf away from the children. I don't remember seeing any dead rats.

My mistress must have thought it was time I learned housework. I did my very best, but try as I might, I could not please her. Her house had the name of being the cleanest, shiniest house for miles around, and I believed it! But she was also the most nerve-wracked woman around as well. She was worse than Miss Wood at Cootamundra. But I did not have anyone else to share the knocks with in Cheltenham. I discovered I could not please her. I was not good at housework, not the way she wanted it anyway. The only thing I was good at was keeping the children out of her way, so that she would not get at them.

I realise now that she must have been pretty sick in her mind. She was training the little boy to leave off nappies and use the toilet, and he would cry with fright when he forgot. Then she would smack him. I couldn't stand it when she gave him those awful hard smacks. After all he was only a baby still.

One day I was out weeding a bed of prize chrysanthemums. They were all staked up high, and were very bushy. When I heard this little fellow crying and calling my name, I called out to him. He was shaking with fear. I picked him up and said, 'What's the matter, love?' I soon knew. His fear of his mother was great and so was mine. Fortunately it was a hot day. He had on those tussore silk panties, and I washed them out under the tap and hung them on the chrysanthemum bushes to dry. I kept him hidden from view in his little short shirt till his pants were dry. Anyway he didn't get belted.

My mistress tried to teach me to wash. I wanted to learn because I had liked washing down by the river with plenty of soapy water, heated in the kerosene tin. That's how Mother and old Aunt did it. But this house had troughs and taps to turn on water, and a copper. Half the time there was not enough wood, or there were only big blocks that I tried to split with a blunt axe. I didn't like washing

days in Cheltenham. I was expected to wash the dirty nappies, some of which I had hidden from my mistress in case the little fellow would be spanked. I know now how wrong it was. On this particular day she found the pile of messy napkins. I was horrified inside and prayed the little fellow was not near. I knew she loved him in some sort of way of course. She grabbed me by the hair and threw all those dirty nappies over me.

I fought like mad. I don't know where I got the strength from. She was trying to rub them on my face. Anyone can guess what I looked like and smelt like and felt like. For the first time I felt a deep resentment. But I had saved that little fellow from a spanking. I know now it was the wrong way to do it. I refused point blank to help her with the washing until I had scrubbed myself with buckets of water. Then she came out and turned the hose on me. Sometimes when she was in a good mood she would spray the children with the hose on a hot day, and she would turn it on me too. I didn't mind and the little ones thought it was great fun.

I shall never forget when my mistress's old mother and father and sister came from Moss Vale to stay. They were very kind and I was very miserable when they left. I was treated and fed better when they were visiting.

I learned to be a good man-of-all-work in the garden. I mowed the lawns as good as the next, and there were huge areas to mow. One lawn was a tennis court although no one played on it. It took some mowing and was heavy work for a homesick Aborigine on a light diet. The children loved playing on the lawns, and in the sand down at the bottom of the garden under the shady trees where the swings were. I used to love swinging them, and it was a happy playing corner and a sort of sanctuary for me as well. The mistress would of course be keeping her eye on us from the many windows of the house.

I was constantly empty and I was always thinking how I could get food from the pantry. For play lunch the children would be given a slice of bread, with butter or jam. They were very well fed and would take only a couple of mouthfuls and discard it. Sometimes I would encourage them to go and ask for some more, and they learned to share it with me. Then their mother asked why the children were always running back for more bread and butter. Bless them, they were innocent enough to say they wanted some for me, so that was the end of it.

I used to look forward to the postman's whistle. He was a dear old fellow with a long black beard and thick black hair. He was a genuine, kindly and cheerful man. He did his rounds on horseback and was never too busy to say a kind word to me. He would always greet the children too and they loved him and so did I. I would always be praying that there would be a letter for me. He would say 'No letter,' or 'there is a letter for you Missy.' He made me feel like a person. He was the bringer of news from my people. We would hear his whistle up the street, and rush to the front gate to wait for him and to pat his horse. On one particular day he gave me a letter and said 'Here is a letter for you Missy.' I dared not open it before my mistress saw it, but with a thrilling, happy expectation I took it to her. She had been watching through the window. She took the letter as I said happily, 'A letter from my mother.' My mother has long since joined her tribe in dreamtime, but I can still remember her handwriting, which people used to say was beautiful, and she spelled perfectly they said.

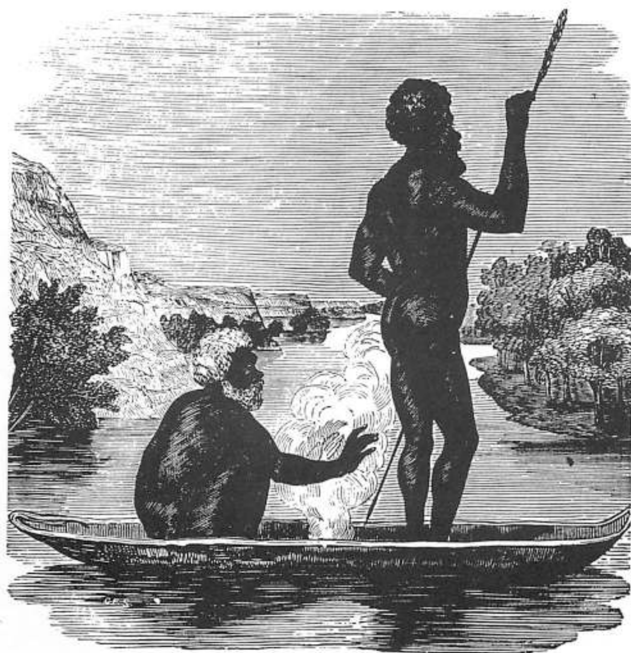
I waited expectantly for my letter to be given me. That day passed, a week, a month. I had forgotten about food in my longing for that letter. I wept. I was too afraid to even mention it. I daren't, as I sensed she may have read something in it that she didn't agree with, and would take it out on me. Oh God, how I prayed for that letter and

An Aboriginal camp as I remember it in my youth; the three Aborigines are wearing possum and kangaroo skins. (Courtesy National Library of Australia.)

An Aboriginal woman carrying her baby in a possum rug. (Courtesy National Library of Australia.)

Canoes on Lake Tyers in 1888. (Courtesy National Library of Australia.)

Lighting a fire in a canoe. (Courtesy National Library of Australia.)



Lighting a fire in a canoe (Courtesy National Library of Australia.)

Pretty Pine Hotel, re-built about 1920, after the old hotel was burnt down. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

hungered for news of home, which seemed as far away as another planet. It was like a disease. A day never passed without my thinking, 'Oh, she'll give it to me today.' I couldn't write home because I depended on her for a stamped envelope and writing paper. Normally I was cunning enough to ask her for it when her husband was home in the evening. She would read every word of the letter I wrote before it was posted.

One day she and another lady took their children to Sydney for the day. She locked up the house and gave me jobs to keep me busy all day: digging in the garden, mowing the lawns, cleaning the shed and raking the poultry yard. I watched them out of sight and then saw the train go by to the city. My blackfellow cunning as she used to describe it came to the surface. I wondered how I could get into that house to search for the letter. The windows all had wire screens and although I discovered one of the windows at the back of the house was open, the screen was firmly in place. I wouldn't give up. I studied the bolt and went into the shed where the tools were kept. I found something I thought would do the job. And so I achieved my first and only housebreaking and entering. I am puzzled still about who helped me, God or the Devil. I firmly believe it wasn't the Devil. I unbolted that long window screen and jumped through with ease. I had a frightened feeling. I had this whole place to myself. It was wrong, but I consoled myself with the thought that my mistress was wrong too in keeping my letter. My instinct led me to her bedroom. I searched the drawers and put back everything carefully. I thought, 'O God, don't let me fail.' And then I remembered people often put things under their pillows or the mattress. I lifted up her mattress and there was my letter! I cannot describe the feeling of joy as I grabbed it and held it. She hadn't opened it! I sat on the floor at the foot of her bed and cried and cried. Then I

put the letter back under the mattress, straightened the bed and made my way out through the window, bolting the screen again. I felt strangely comforted now I knew where the letter was. Later, I asked my mistress when she was in a good mood if I could write a letter to my mother. She took her time finding the paper and envelope, and then she brought to light my mother's letter. I honestly feel she had forgotten. I wrote home, but couldn't tell Mother of my deep need, and of the happenings. I could only draw things that happened. I liked to do this. Mother got the letter and was horrified by what she read in those drawings.

Miserable days turned into weeks—months—years. I was almost sixteen years old, tall, skinny, and growing more cunning every day, but not quite cunning enough in pinching food. Every chance available, I took a little something from the pantry. Although the shelves were loaded, there wasn't much of a selection: jams, sugar and uncooked commodities. I would hide food under the house. It was handy, because Mrs Smith would give me the left-over porridge, when there was any, without milk or sugar, so the jam I'd hidden made a lot of difference. I feel awful when I think of those days and the thieving I was practising. God seemed far away, as did my mother, father, aunt and uncle and sisters—in fact all my people.

Winters and summers came and went. I was always scantily dressed in a thin blouse and skirt and underneath a hessian sugar-bag singlet that Mrs Smith made; I had no other underclothing and my legs and feet were bare. In winter the cold was unbearable. I would wait for the first streak of sun and would stand in that spot or move when the sun shifted. The sun was my friend when it was not covered by clouds. On frosty mornings I would sit in the shed, and cover myself with a bag. One of my duties was to get up early, make my bed, and get Mr and Mrs Smith a

cup of tea. I would snatch a cup of tea for myself. Then they would get up. The boss had to go to work. I would not be allowed inside all day. The early morning cup of tea was stopped after a while, because I put too much milk in my own tea. I did too. That meant they didn't have enough milk for breakfast. Tea went off my diet! I suppose I was an expense.

I always looked forward to the visits of her brother-in-law and sister from Queensland. When they came she couldn't lose face by not dishing up a meal for me. It is a true saying that the way to a person's heart is through his or her stomach! I loved everyone in that house while I was being fed.

The brother-in-law was a very quiet man, and I was a bit afraid of him. I was always shy of white men. His wife was beautiful and kind, and always slipped me a cup of tea at lunch time, outside.

I became an expert in cleaning boots and shoes, as I did them every day. I did the brother-in-law's as well.

The two weeks' visit had to end. The morning they were going, the brother-in-law took a stroll outside with the children. I was very thrilled when he said, 'Thank you for cleaning my boots every morning,' and then he gave me five shillings. My heart was overflowing. A little later they both came out to say goodbye, and he slipped me a half-crown. I thought I was rich. I went straight to the shed and hid the five shillings where I hid my mother's letters. (I used to read them over and over again.) I don't know what made me put the half-crown in a different place! However, as soon as they had gone, my mistress came and said, 'Give me the money my brother-in-law gave you.' She must have asked him if he had given me anything, and that is why I think he gave me the second lot. She said I had to pay for things I had broken, such as cups. I was miserable as I handed her the half-crown, hoping she did not know

about the five shillings. I thanked God and hid it in a safer place until I could use it, which happened to be sooner than I expected.

When I look back at those years I see how cunning I got and what an obsession I had with food. I pondered over how I was going to obtain food with that money. The nearest shop was a mile away at Epping. I didn't have a hope of being let out on my own. But out of the blue, I was sent to Epping on an urgent message for my mistress. I assured her that I would go straight there and back. I enjoyed the walk. There were trees and shrubs along the way and I felt the freedom of being alone, being trusted. It did not enter my head to run away. As I clutched the five shillings tied in a piece of rag, I thought and wondered what eats I could buy with it. I soon made up my mind. Rock cakes and other kinds of cake. I ate some walking back and thought I would keep some for tomorrow, or longer, if I could. I wouldn't need to pinch any food. Not that there was much hope of that. My mistress seemed to know my every move. Just before I arrived at the front gate, I saw a thick hedge, well kept, along someone else's front fence. Before I entered the gate, I hid my half dozen luscious cakes in their paper bag. I found what I thought was a good hiding place in that garden hedge. I went contentedly through the gate, the front door opened, and out she came. I knew by the look on her face that something was not going to be good for me. She had been watching for me through the windows as usual and had seen me. 'Follow me,' she said. She opened the gate and went straight to my bag of cakes, back through her own gate and up the drive with me following her, anxious about my cakes. Then she detoured to the fowl yard with me still following and opened the gate. The ducks, bantams and fowls clustered round thinking it was feeding time, although it was the wrong time of the day.

She took the cakes out of the bag and broke them into little pieces deliberately. I felt I couldn't win, so why keep trying? Those fowls just picked casually at a piece of cake here and there and then walked away. The truth dawned on me some time later. They were better fed than I. Then without a word, she marched out of the fowl yard, leaving me standing there. When she was out of sight, I hunted the chooks away and picked up some of the bigger pieces of cake and put them in the paper bag she had thrown on the ground. At Moonahculla, no matter how hungry we were, we did not pick things off the gound and eat them.

I wondered why she disliked me so. I had got so used to her calling me a 'wretched black', not realizing I was one.

Another hungry day for me, a fifteen-year-old, and still growing. I was told by my mistress to get the rake, an old broom and the wheelbarrow, to clean out the fowl houses and rake up the large fowl yard. I was hungry, as I had had no breakfast. As I raked, I was thinking of stews, bread and butter or jam, even good old bread and dripping.

I stopped raking for a minute's rest, keeping an eye on the gate for my mistress, who had the knack of popping up at the wrong moment. I guess she didn't trust me. As I watched the antics of those fowls and ducks, I thought it would be good to have one of them on the coals in a pot, but they all looked at me trustingly with their heads sideways, clucking away in chooks' language.

A bright thought came to me as I resumed raking the old straw out of the nests, putting it in little heaps, which I set fire to, and then spreading fresh straw into the nests. I took the eggs out of the nests as I went along. Then I put one egg into each little heap of hot ashes, carefully concealed. I raked away cheerfully in anticipation of a good meal.

Just as I thought the eggs would be ready, I saw the mistress coming through the gate. I raked furiously as she stood and looked around to see if I had left anything

unraked. She had no complaint and I was feeling pleased with myself. I meekly asked if there was anything else I could rake. I was longing to get at those eggs, but she lingered for just half a minute more, and I felt I was not yet safe. As she turned to go the eggs started to pop, such a crack! My hunger left me. All I could think was she would kill me.

She snatched the rake from my hand and raked the eggs out, stamping on them with her feet. Afterwards I did wonder if the good Lord was trying to teach me a lesson about stealing. Thou shalt not steal. I should have said to her, 'those eggs are just a drop in the ocean, compared to the whole of my country, which you have stolen.'

I have gone through many awful experiences, and I often wonder what I have learned through them. It has taken me a long long time to see, in spite of everything, that bitterness and hate is not the way, but caring for all people, rich or poor, goes a long way to righting wrongs.

I shall do my best to forget and not to keep the memories of those experiences sizzling in my heart. They are the experiences of many black people and, I am sure, of many white children.

On another day I was minding the children down at the bottom of the garden in the sand pit where there was a two-seated swing. When the children got tired of playing in the sand, I put them on the swing and I stood on the platform between the two seats. They are not meant to go too high, and I watched them carefully. However, I did not watch myself, and as one seat went down and the other up, one of the seats scraped my shin bone quite hard. I thought my leg was broken and cried with the pain. The little ones watched sympathetically. The oldest one wanted to tell her mother, but I said I was all right, knowing that my mistress would not let me swing the children any more if she heard about it. I tried not to limp

when she was near. One day soon after this she and another lady across the street decided to take their children to the Zoo, and I was taken with them. Any other time I would have been thrilled, as I knew I had a chance of being given something to eat at a picnic when there were other people around. I hid my limp as best I could. In those days black cotton stockings were worn, and when my leg started to bleed the black dye did its work and the stocking stuck to my leg. When we got home, I tried to get the stocking off. It was very painful and when I eventually succeeded there was a deep running sore, ugly-looking. I tied the stocking round it to stop the bleeding, hoping it wouldn't be noticed under my long skirt. However, it got worse, and I couldn't hide it any longer. My mistress asked me why I was limping. I had to show her the leg. She gave a gasp and ran out of the room to the telephone. She called the doctor. I was sitting on the garden seat near the kitchen door when he came. I don't know what she told him, but she said later that if the wound had gone a fraction deeper it would have reached the bone, and I would have had to have my leg off. She also said the doctor said Aborigines had no feeling, we were like animals, our wounds just healed without any trouble. It didn't worry me. Things could not have been any worse anyhow. I had to sit every day for nearly a week under the trees out the back on that garden seat with my leg up. She brought the dishes out to me to wash up. I cleaned the silver and peeled the vegetables, all because the doctor said I had to sit down and I was not to use the leg. She grudgingly gave me food such as broth, because the doctor said I was to have it. I never told her how the sore started. I suppose it would not have made much difference.

One morning I was washing up outside with my legs up. I did not do something properly. She was in a bad mood and I copped it as the saying is. She boxed my ears as

she held me by the hair. She slapped my face as I cried, 'Don't, you are hurting me.' She was like a mad person. She didn't stop until her husband came to the door and begged her to stop because she was upsetting herself. As I fell off the seat, bad leg and all, I started to yell. Her husband said, 'Oh, dear, can't you stop her, the neighbours will hear.' He gave me an idea. I just yelled and yelled and screamed. She threw water on me. I still yelled. She said she would ring the police. I felt nothing could be worse and kept yelling. Then I saw that two of the children had come out and were crying for me. I shut up and cuddled them and said, 'Don't cry, don't cry.' I didn't get hit for a long time after that, although other tactics were to be used. My leg got better.

When Aboriginal girls were sent to situations, we were not given many clothes. Our mistresses had to clothe us. Hence my first experience of wearing a hessian bag singlet, a winceyette skirt, and a print blouse and nothing else. Maybe I was hard on clothes. When she put me into cast-off trousers of her husband's I was ashamed, and spent my time hiding away every time a tradesman came. Once when the young milkman came to collect his money I hardly had time to run round the high chrysanthemums. He must have glimpsed me and wondered who the new black boy was. He wasn't satisfied and started to chase me around that chrysanthemum bed. I rushed for the toilet and shut myself in from his grinning face. Ironically, wearing trousers wouldn't matter these days, but it was a shameful thing then.

Time went on. One day my mother came. I had drawn pictures in my last letter to give her an idea of what was happening. She braved that long journey to that big unknown city and found the headquarters of the Australian Inland Mission where our missionaries had come from in my early days. My mother found one of them

and his family in Sydney and poured out her heart to him. He straightaway took her to the Aborigines Protection Board office. She told how she believed I was being ill-treated. My mistress told me later that the Aborigines Protection Board called my mother 'that woman'. Even the missionary was inclined to think that my mother was unnecessarily worried, as the Board told her she had 'absolutely nothing to worry about'.

I will never forget the day my mother came. My mistress went out of her way to be nice to her and to me too. I had been given decent clothes the day before, the excuse being that I had to have the others washed. I still had my winceyette skirt and print blouse, but for the first time for a long while I was told to put on my boots instead of going around barefooted.

Mother must have been a good tracker, because she found this house where I was. I was down the bottom of the yard with the little children, amusing them in the sand or giving them a swing. My mistress came out with a plate of food and some milk. She gave me some as well, an unheard of thing. I was grateful for the food and accepted it with wonder and delight. Then she joined in with the children, making sand castles. She even made me get on the swing with the children, holding the little boy on my knee. I was embarrassed, and wondered what was going to happen next. She pushed the swing. The children were delighted. I giggled. Then she stopped abruptly and went towards the front gate, where there was a woman standing and waving to us. And she was dark! I caught the words my mistress said as she walked away: 'You stay with the children,' which I thought was a strange thing to say. It didn't take me long to understand. I stared at the person at the gate and my dullness cleared as I realized it was my mother. Oh the joy, I can feel it as I write. I experienced it. I kept thinking how? how did she find me? How did she

manage it?—all this I thought in the space of a second. As I think of it now, I cry, I cannot help it. I think of my wonderful Aboriginal mother finding her way from the bush. She had read my drawings—a figure chasing a smaller figure, hitting the small one on the head with a saucepan.

My mistress was trying to stop her coming through the gate. Mother was waving her arms about, and I was afraid she would get into trouble if I went to her. I thought 'Please God, don't let her be hurt, it's my fault. If I go to her it will only make things worse.' But my mistress was no match for a distraught mother who had had her children taken from her. She came to where I was standing with the children. My whole being was catapulted to meet her. Tears ran down both our faces.

She stroked my head and said, 'How tall you have grown.'

I laughed nervously and all I could say was 'Mum, you here.'

I don't know how my mother did it, but she was allowed to stay the night with me. With all this going on, my mistress was still worrying about not having tea ready on time for her husband. I can remember Mother asking her for an apron and she helped get the master's tea on time. Between tea and bedtime, my mistress told Mother how naughty and hard-headed I was. She said she might get into trouble for having Mother stay. We talked, and being a woman of faith, Mother prayed to God for help. I felt things would be righted. I felt ashamed and miserable for the unhappiness I had created for her. But I was happy and joyful she was with me. I just didn't dare think about what was going to happen afterwards. I told her everything. As I write now, I am filled with shame for doing so. But I did not fully understand my mother's fighting spirit. I had so much fear of the white man's

power and was terrified for my Aboriginal people. I didn't know the answer to it all.

Mother went to the city next morning after first asking if she could do something to help. She always showed a giving spirit. The next few days seemed to pass quickly. My mistress was getting back to her usual form. Perhaps seeing my mother may have spoilt me, but I was still up in the clouds, because she had said she was going to try to beg the Aborigines Protection Board to let me go home with her. It certainly was a big hope and it did not materialize. But it was a thrill when Mother did turn up again and not alone. My father was with her. I was down at the bottom of the garden in the sand pit again with the children. Like a vision, my mistress was at the gate and I watched her lead my mother and father down to the sand pit and the swing. I did not have my boots on. I felt ashamed as my mother, and Father especially, dressed well. He was still a roamer, but somehow Mother had tracked him down in the big city of Sydney. I tried to dig my toes in the sand to hide my big feet. I felt shy of my father. He was a handsome man, and although Mother was a tall woman, she looked tiny beside him. I greeted him but I was still conscious of my bare feet and how I was dressed. I think my mistress was too. She talked to my parents and they could hardly get a word to me. I remember my father offering me two half-crowns. I was thrilled. Then my mistress said, 'No, Margaret has plenty of everything. She doesn't need it.' I felt like yelling, 'I do need it, I do.' I watched my father's hands still holding the half-crowns, while my mother was talking to my mistress. While she wasn't looking, my father dropped the two half-crowns where he was standing and with his boot moved some sand over them. He gave me a quick glance and a wink to see if I'd seen what had happened. I'd seen all right. When I remember some of the shifty things I had to get up to, to exist, I feel

ashamed. I cannot remember how I spent those two beautiful silver half-crowns.

My mistress told me the next day that the Protection Board had telephoned her and told her that 'that man and woman' were creating a terrible disturbance and wanting to take me home. From what she said, I knew there was no hope. So I went back to my old routine. May I be forgiven for having felt miserable and hopeless? I had turned sixteen and longed for freedom with my people. Seeing my mother and father had made things worse. Not knowing when I would see them again, I lost all sense of time. And I was made to suffer more indignities. I don't know why she would get cross with me when I least expected it. She would take a great delight in making me strip, and then she would turn the hose on me in front of the men working on a building next door. Fortunately I never had any insults from them. I just wanted to die, nothing mattered any more.

I started thinking about the easiest way to have an accident to end it all. I thought of getting over the tall paling fence at the bottom of the fowl yard, and then down to the train line where the country trains and goods trains came and went all day. The passenger train travelled too fast, but the goods train was slow coming up the hill from the city. I toyed with the idea of getting a broken leg, then they would have to send me home as I wouldn't be able to work any more. The thought fascinated me. After another belting and having my hair pulled, I sneaked down to the railway line. Some suburban trains went past. They frightened me because they were too fast. I heard the slow goods train struggling up the incline. I crept nearer to the train line and thought 'I mustn't be frightened.' I was very near when the two train firemen yelled and bellowed at me to get to b. . . . hell out of it. Believe me, I did, and didn't stop running till I was back over the fence into the fowl

yard. I prayed those men wouldn't tell on me. I need not have worried, I didn't hear anything of it. I started to think up something else. I was too miserable for words. I could not do anything to please her.

I feel now I was fretting for home after seeing my mother and father, and I was like a crazy person. It was a Sunday I remember because the little girls were with their father and the little boy was asleep. I thought of something. It became an obsession. I wondered what could make me ill. I didn't want to die. I just wanted to be ill and go home. So the wicked plan came to me to take *Rough on Rats.* I knew where they hid the tin. I got it down. It was after the Sunday dinner in which I had been included because the boss was home. I remember how I loved eating the young carrots that were a bit salty. I rolled two little bits of *Rough on Rats* into a soft ball, small enough to swallow, which I did. That moment my mistress, who had long hair, called me in to brush it. She always did this when her husband was home playing with the children. As I brushed, I began to feel funny and my arms wouldn't work. She protested angrily because my hand with the brush was just flapping and flopping on her head. My head and stomach were acting funny. I was dizzy and wanted to be sick. I told her what I had done. As I staggered down to the back yard I fortunately vomited and vomited. I fell, but managed to crawl back to the kitchen steps. Meanwhile she was ringing the doctor. She was very upset and got me into bed. The doctor said afterwards that the vomiting had saved me. But I felt it was the salty carrots. Anyway whatever it was, *Rough on Rats* was rough on me!

It was not long before the lady inspector from the Aborigines Protection Board came out. I was fond of her. She was always kind to me, but she didn't know how I was treated, and I would not tell her. She scolded me and made

me promise not to do such an awful thing again. She need not have worried. I was not likely to, but I managed to pluck up enough courage to say I could not please my mistress. She was standing near and put her arms around my shoulders and said, 'Oh, yes, you can Margaret dear.' Anyway, strangely enough, I was left alone, was given meals, and was adequately dressed for some weeks after the Board visit. Then one day a nurse friend of my mistress who had an orchard of all kinds of fruit she used to preserve, asked my mistress if she could have me for the day to help her. I was thrilled when my mistress reluctantly said I could go. I had to go to Pennant Hills. I ran to get that train, and just caught it. I had a sneaking suspicion that my mistress didn't want me to catch it. But I did, and then realised I hadn't been given my fare. However, I was let off, and spent a long day with Nurse Field, who rang and told my mistress that I was a wonderful help. I can't remember now how it happened, but my mother was later engaged to work for Nurse Field and was allowed to have my little sister with her.

CHAPTER TEN

THE GOOD LORD was taking over at last: Another surprise! I was moved to another home in Neutral Bay. My new mistress was a motherly type, the wife of a cattleman from Goondiwindi. She had five little children. One was born two days after I arrived, a little boy who I promptly took over. I remember it was the day the Prince of Wales arrived in Sydney. We all went to see him land. I started to enjoy life, but I missed the little boy and the two little girls I had looked after for those years at Cheltenham.

My mother was working in the city and on one of her first days off, she and my younger sister Geraldine came to see me in Neutral Bay. Mother asked my new mistress, who was a short, motherly ladylike type, if I could go out with her and my little sister. To my amazement I was

allowed. Mother promised to bring me back again and as we got on the ferry, she said, 'I am taking you to see the little children you used to look after.' They had grown! Even Mrs Smith was pleased to see me, although she told me I had got too fat.

I learned a great deal at my new place. They were an ordinary, happy, honest family. I fitted in with them and was reasonably contented. I used to take the children for walks, or rather they used to take me, because I didn't know my way about. The only daughter was ten and I loved going walkabout with her around the sea. The Zoo was not far and it was quite bushy walking around Sirius Cove, looking across to Cremorne Point. Life with my new mistress and family was very different from Cheltenham. They were a wholesome family, and in all my life since I cannot remember a family quite like them. They had had to move to the city because the children needed good schooling. When Mr Pierce came home to his family from his cattle station in his less busy times, I liked him right away. Not that I had much to do with him, but I felt he was straight and kind, and could see right into you. I used to hear him having a heart-to-heart talk with his children, especially his older son and daughter, aged eight and eleven. The girl was a fiery type, and the boy was like his dad, and many a fight he got into with his mates over me when they called me a 'blackfellow'. Children grow up I find, in the way their parents live.

For the first time I had three good meals a day. I learned there was no fear of the truth in this family. I had to call the children 'Miss' and 'Master', although not the baby of course. It didn't worry me. It was the English way. But I didn't like it in public places when I took them on outings. Then I would drop the 'Miss' or 'Master'. The boys wouldn't mind, but the elder girl did, and I heard her complaining to her mum and dad. I didn't hear what her

Billy Ingram and his brother Jack (in the boat), brothers of my Uncle Osley Ingram.

Some of the Ingram and Green families.

This was taken from an old print in the possession of Hubert Day. I think it was taken at Moonahculla.

Dinny Myers, a full-blood Aborigine, who lived at Moonahculla.

Above: Jack Brown with Gladys Day and Nelly Briggs (the daughter of Harry and Sarah Briggs). He was one of the best accordian and concertina players in the old days and could jig and step dance marvellously.

Left: Hubert Day in 1975. He lives in Deliliquin now but his family used to live at Moonahculla. He lent me many of the old photographs for this book. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

mother said but her father was gently amused. He gave her a good talking-to, making her see she was still only a little girl. It puzzled me, and made me think. I was proud too, and although I was becoming very fond of this family, this 'Master' and 'Miss' to children brought home to me the fact that I was only a servant after all. It reminded me of the story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. However, I learned many things in that home. Mr Pierce taught those children to always speak the truth, no matter what the consequences. They had their squabbles of course and often got into mischief, but they didn't defend themselves by telling a lie. This fascinated me and became a kind of challenge when I broke a valuable dish and fought with my conscience for hours. I was terrified of owning up, but having seen and heard those children owning up kept nagging at me.

At two o'clock the following morning I heard the baby crying in his cot in his mother's room. I didn't usually pick him up at night but now I quietly got up and picked him up and changed him. Then I took him to another room and sang softly so as not to wake the others. He went to sleep, and as I put him back in his cot, Mrs Pierce woke up and she was very pleased. I told her the truth about breaking the dish. All she said was, 'Never mind, go to bed and sleep now.' I did. Later on, when the little fellow began to toddle, he used to come to my room and knock on the door and call 'Margareta.'

I was being treated kindly, although not quite like one of the family, but something was missing. I was discontented. I was seventeen, and hearing what other girls who had been in the Home in Cootamundra were doing, I got restless. My young sister May had long since left the Home and had been sent out to a family in Strathfield.

I put in for a couple of weeks' holiday to go home to see my people and was thrilled when it was granted. It was

wonderful being with my people and I very reluctantly returned to Sydney. It was very hard getting back into a work routine again. I had a visit from my Auntie May, my father's sister, a gentle, attractive girl of about twenty. She stayed for the night. I liked her very much. She had been taken away and had been in the Cootamundra Home a few years before me. When May, Myrtle and I were taken there she had long since been sent out to service. I also had a visit from my sister May, who had run away from the place where she had been put to work. I got a shock at my gentle, delicate sister doing such a thing! I felt admiration for her and thought I wasn't as courageous as she was. She came to see me several times, and I began to get discontented because I thought I was missing so much so-called freedom. My dear little mistress was most kind and would let May have tea and stay the night. We would talk far into the night, all about the fun she was having and the Aboriginal families she had found, and how she had seen my father, who she said was pretty strict in the advice he'd given her. She was friendly with a West Indian family who gave her love and care. Their home was like a home away from home.

After these visits and chats, I made up my mind I wasn't going to be a Cinderella and stay at home, so I begged my reluctant sister to wait outside the front gate one night and I would meet her and go out with her. She was working and had some money for fares, and I had my pocket money, which was always given me by my mistress. Her husband was very generous too when he was home and always paid me well for keeping the garden tidy.

But human nature being what it is, I thoughtlessly, selfishly and excitedly climbed out of my bedroom window and ran to the front gate where my sister was waiting for me. It was thrilling going across to the city in the ferry. I couldn't sit down and stood holding the rails

watching the waves as the boat glided across the Harbour to Circular Quay. Then my sister and I made our way to Wooloomooloo, where her West Indian friends lived. It was the first time I had been there. May's coloured friends were very kind to her I noticed, and it was a night I shall never forget. Her special friend was called Carrie. She took us next door, where a party was in progress. I could hear the noise before getting there and was a bit apprehensive, but trusted Carrie because May said she was a nice girl. I had all sorts of feelings. It was the home of white people, called Adam, but was filled with Samoan seamen. I think Mr Adam may have been on the same ship and brought them home. There were about twenty of them, really big fellows. I had never had such an experience! There were two Maoris as well. I was very frightened at first, but Carrie told me they were all right, the lady of the house was her friend. They were singing in their language in rich, deep voices. I had never seen anything like their dances. They were decent fellows. They tried to talk with us, but we couldn't understand each other's language.

It was soon time to go home. The two Maoris had to catch the last ferry to the North Shore, and as I had to get home too, Carrie put me in their charge, and May thought it was all right. Luckily we caught the last tram and then the last ferry, but there were no trams on the other side to Mosman or Neutral Bay. Nothing daunted, I said 'Goodnight' to the two Maoris (they had to get out to their ship in the middle of the harbour somewhere) and I started to walk home, not knowing how far it was. I thought I'd follow the tram line around. However, one of the Maori boys chased after me and said it wouldn't be right for me to walk that distance alone at night. I protested and said I would be all right, but to tell the truth, I was fearful and shy of any man. But as we walked along we talked about each other's country and customs, and we got used to each other.

He said he would like to see me again. He did not appeal to me, except as a friend. I said I would see him and all of them again at Mrs Adam's home. I liked her, and I thought I'd go there again.

The next night I climbed out the window again, when I thought everyone was asleep. I got the ferry to Circular Quay and the tram to Wooloomooloo. The people were nice and seemed glad to see me, and I felt free, or so I thought. It was a bit frightening. I felt that somewhere I wasn't playing the game. I caught the ferry back and the last tram and the same Maori came with me again. I protested and told him I knew my way home. I left him at the tram stop and told him to catch the tram back or he would have to walk.

When I reached home I found all the lights on and the door of my room wide open. I was terrified. They would think I was a bad girl, and I would be sent to the Parramatta Home for bad girls, where my old mistress had said I would end up. They gave bad girls exactly what they deserved there, she'd said. I really didn't know what I was doing. I reached through the window of my room, grabbed another dress and hat and bolted again for the Mosman wharf to catch the ferry boat back. Somehow I got back to Carrie's home, but her people discouraged Carrie from having me there when they found out that I was a runaway. I didn't blame them. So Carrie took me round to Mrs Adam. I sensed I wasn't welcome there either, but she didn't say so. The front door was wide open, and while we were talking, two big detectives walked past with the young Maori between them. We were all rooted to the spot. I could hardly breathe with fright. Fortunately they went to Carrie's house first. Mrs Adam meanwhile tried all sorts of hiding places for me in the house, but it was no use. I was like a zombie, my brain wouldn't work at all. Mrs Adam took me out the back

where there was a high brick wall, the back yard of another house was over the other side, and next to it a vacant block of land, with high grass growing. Poor Mrs Adam, swearing like a trooper, told me to climb over the wall and drop onto the vacant block and hide there for a while.

I tried to do as she told me but landed instead on the next door well-netted fowl yard. The fowls started a terrible racket with the help of an old rooster. There I was, a young girl in that undignified position on a sagging wire-netting fowl house! The owner of the house came out to see what the commotion was. He was really mad, and roared 'What the devil do you think you are doing there?'

When I could get my faculties I said the first thing that came into my mind. I told him I was so sorry but was after a ball I had accidentally thrown over onto his fowl house, and if he could please help me off and give me nails and a hammer I would fix up his wire netting. I was sure I could do it.

He was a kind man and grudgingly heaped coals of fire on my head by saying 'Never mind,' as he gave me his hand to pull me out of the netting.

'Look and see if your ball is around, I'll fix the fowl netting,' he said, as he went to get nails and hammer.

I got through a little square hole in his brick fence. I couldn't help thinking 'O Lord, I'm sorry—this is what comes when I get mixed up in wrong things.' I fell into the high grass on the other side, and lay in it as long as I could without arousing his suspicion. Then, remembering those detectives, I got up and pretended to look about for a lost ball for that kind man's benefit. I pretended to search for about a quarter of an hour, then climbed up and looked over Mrs Adam's fence to see if all was clear. She spotted me and told me to put my b...... head down, which I hurriedly did. I was between two fires. I walked round searching for an imaginary ball, wishing I was

safely back at Mrs Pierce's in Neutral Bay with the children.

Then Mrs Adam stuck her head up on the other side of the wall and hissed, 'Come on quick, get over here,' and I was deeply grateful to her. She did not know me, and could have washed her hands of the whole affair. Wonderful little dark Carrie too. They took me inside and found clothes to disguise me. They gave me a long black skirt belonging to Mrs Adam, and a little black jacket, and to top it up, a black hat and veil.

I felt in a hopeless mess and wondered where May was. I asked Carrie and she said, 'She'll turn up and I'll tell her where you are.' They tried to find a job for me. I went with them to several places. but no one wanted a maid, let alone one dressed as I was. However, we were told to try a warehouse on the corner of Cleveland Street, in Redfern. We found a family of Syrians there, an old mother and father with seven children. I stayed with this family, who were dears, and very hard working. I slept in the bedroom with a daughter of sixteen. I was very happy there, because the routine was relaxed—even haphazard. I just pleased myself where and what I cleaned up, and how I did it. But they were pleased, and I really did my best. I fitted in with the family so much that I didn't even get paid! Theresa, my special mate, was very sweet. I went to their Syrian Church. I got very fond of the whole family and their many Syrian friends. Some didn't know how to take me of course.

One of the older boys asked me if I would go to the pictures with him. He was a good-looking young man, but I wasn't happy going out with any boy just then. I wanted to feel free, but he wanted a yes or no. I reluctantly said 'yes.' He was a kind fellow, but I was afraid of men.

Some weeks went by. I felt a longing to see Carrie and to hear if May was around. Everyone but Carrie treated me

very coolly, I guessed they didn't wish to be mixed up with a runaway who the police were looking for. I felt they were genuinely afraid.

Although I had more or less settled in with this Syrian family, I was restless. I felt I had let down Miss Lowe of the Aborigines Protection Board. She had been good to me. People only had to give us a kind smile and say 'Hello' and we Aboriginal girls far away from home thought it was great. One of the young Syrian men liked me, but I was timid and felt it wasn't the right way.

It's strange when I think of it now, but I telephoned Miss Lowe. She was the only one on the Aborigines Protection Board I had confidence in. When I heard her voice answering, I was full of fright, but stood firm, and told her who was speaking. I had to repeat my name several times. She couldn't believe it, after months of not knowing where I was. She asked me to come in next day to see her, which I did, taking Theresa with me. Theresa begged that I be left with their family. However, I was sent to a sheep station, twenty-five miles from Walgett, where I spent three years.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I ENJOYED THE JOURNEY by train to Walgett. My new mistress had a little girl about ten, a dignified, quiet little person with long golden hair. She and her mother travelled in the first class and I was quite happy in the second class with a middle-aged lady and her husband, and a couple of cheerful shearers, who soon started to sing. They asked me if I knew any songs. I said 'yes,' politely. Mother had taught us to sing in harmony, and the missionaries had taught us Sunday School choruses, so we were never shy of singing. Now, in the train, I started singing some negro spirituals, then went on to popular songs. Theresa, my Syrian friend back in Sydney, played the piano and bought all the latest songs, so I'd learned them with her. I sang one after the other as they kept asking for more. The middle-aged lady and her husband

asked me to sing others and everyone joined in. It broke the boredom of the journey for all of us. I sang and sang. My new mistress's little girl told me later they could hear the singing from their carriage.

From Walgett there was a twenty-five mile drive to the Burumbil homestead. Another eighty miles on was Brewarrina, where my sister May had been sent to work at the Settlement. I settled down at once and took a delight in learning to do simple cooking. I loved to put all my energy into scrubbing the huge verandah around that beautiful homestead. I tried to keep it spotless. I liked this new mistress. She was older than the other mistresses. She had a dry sense of humour, like her husband, who was of Scottish origin. He was middle-aged and a man of very few words. I liked and respected him at once.

There was plenty to eat, plenty of work, a good bed, plenty of fresh air, and the boss and my mistress were people with plenty of commonsense.

In the busy seasons it was hard work, with extra men to cook for, including one Aborigine, who told me Mr Campbell was a very good boss. The two shearers I had met coming up in the train turned up for the shearing. I was glad to see them. They were kind fellows and wanted to know how I was getting on. I told them the cooking was easy. A sheep was killed once a week, or, if the weather was cool, twice a week. We would eat it fresh for about three days, then salt down the remainder. The salted meat was very enjoyable.

The meat had to be salted because there were no fridges in those days, only a Coolgardie safe. This was made of thin hessian round a frame. A square tin holding water was placed on top, and clean thick towelling, which was placed in the water, hung down the sides from the top, and through this towelling the water dripped constantly. The safe was kept in a corner on the verandah where the breeze

would blow through. It was remarkably effective for keeping butter, milk and food fresh on the hottest days.

There were four children, but the three eldest were away at college, and only the youngest girl was at home. She used to ride everywhere on a pony, which I also learned to ride. I was scared and I think the little black horse knew this because he didn't like me on his back. He used to swell out his sides by breathing in when I put the saddle on. Then when I put my foot in the stirrup to mount, this dear little fellow would breathe out, deflate, and the saddle would slacken and slip, and I would find myself underneath, much to the amusement of the onlookers. One of the men told me to give the pony a couple of smacks to stop his mischief. But he knew plenty more tricks. Once when I fell off I heard great laughter coming from the station hands, and looking round to see where my little friend was, I was almost sure I could see a smile of glee on his face too!

Soon after I went to Burumbil, May was found a job at a station a few miles away, and the owners were friends of the Campbells, who I worked for.

May was a good rider and would come over on horseback to see me. One day when she was over, I asked if I could go for a little ride with her on the black pony. I was given permission but told on no account to attempt to ride my sister's big bay horse. I didn't like being told in this roundabout way that I couldn't ride very well, so when we were out of sight, I begged my sister to change horses. She was very reluctant, and that made me more determined. I felt important sitting on the big bay, and my sister began to enjoy the pony. He started to trot, and then both horses went into a canter, then a gallop. I saw a gate coming up and tried to pull up. I screamed to my sister to stop the pony, but she didn't want to, she was so delighted that the pony was holding its own with the big horse. I pulled at

the reins of the bay, but he didn't respond, only kicked up his hind quarters. I don't remember my fall, but I think it was quite spectacular. I found myself facing the opposite way in a dusty ditch at the side of the road. My sister was crying, but when she found I was still alive, she scolded the horse. I got back on the pony and May remounted her big horse, which was now quite docile.

The next morning I could hardly move. I felt as though all my bones were broken. My mistress's brother, who always came in early for a cup of tea before going out to exercise the racehorses he was training, said to me, 'My word you were going some on that horse, you did come a cropper.'

I was amazed that this white man had tracked us down, so I owned up. He laughed and laughed. I begged him not to tell. I think he did though, because I wasn't allowed to go riding for a while.

At one time May came to stay for a week as her boss and his wife had gone on a visit, and asked if she could stay with me.

We had great fun. One day I was taking the washing off the line, a very long one outside the kitchen gate. As I gathered the dry clothes I put an armful in the clothes basket and got another lot. I looked back at the half-filled basket of clean washing to see two of our pet pigs having great fun rolling amongst the beautifully white sheets and tablecloths. These pigs always followed me everywhere. I screamed at them with rage. The rascals grunted, turned tail and fled. My sister's merriment knew no bounds.

'Never mind, I'll help you wash them again,' she said.

My sister and I enjoyed exchanging stories of our experiences. We would go down to the bottom of the garden where the Chinese gardener was working near the Barwon, which flowed swiftly nearby. He would give us luscious water melons and other fruit in season.

I used to feed the orphan lambs, and sometimes half a dozen of them would follow me down to collect the mail, about three quarters of a mile away. I had to press down the fencing wires so they could get through each time. They were great company. Old Grace, the tabby cat, was always having kittens, which would be drowned each time. It would break my heart. One that was lucky not to be drowned was called by young Katherine, the younger daughter, Sticky Beak. It wasn't a bit afraid, and would sneak up to the horses feeding outside the kitchen fence. When he got near them, he would roll over and the horses would sniff and nuzzle him and then get on with their feeding.

One day during May's holiday with me and while my mistress and Katherine were away in Sydney, May and I were looking through her case at some of the things she prized. She gave me a pretty postcard and a handkerchief. We spent some delightful moments reading her letters from home, including one from dear old Auntie, enquiring how her 'ugly duckling' was getting on. I was the 'ugly duckling'. I knew she loved me and I looked upon the name as a pet name. I had no illusions about my appearance. I was on the plump side and my curly hair hung to my shoulders or was sometimes done up in an ungainly bun.

As I turned over May's things I picked something else out of her case. It was a sinister-looking revolver. I could not stand the sight of a gun and gasped out 'Where did you get this from?' She hesitated, but then told me it had belonged to the police officer where she had worked in Wellington, before she was sent to Brewarrina. His wife was hard to get on with she said, and told tales about May, to her husband, the policeman. May was only sixteen at the time, and not a strong girl. Once she had been locked up in their town gaol. Another time the policeman got so

exasperated with the tales his wife told that he hit May across the shin with the handle of a broom. It was so painful that she had cried for days. I was horror-struck when my sister told me this story. She finished by saying she had been sick with humiliation. She had found this little revolver and now she carried it about with her. If he had hit her again, she would have shot herself. I silently thanked God she was safely there with me.

'But what are you doing with it now?' I asked her.

She quickly said she had fun with it trying to shoot rabbits and wild duck on the river. Sensing that I was troubled, she put the revolver back in her case and closed it. She went outside and saddled the pony, and rounded up the cows, putting them in their yards ready for milking in the morning. While she was away, I opened her case and took out that ugly weapon. I hid it under my mattress. When she packed her things as she was leaving to work at the neighbouring station, I held my breath wondering if she would miss it. She did, and turned on me asking if I had taken it.

Half crying I blurted out 'Yes, and I threw it in the river, because I though you might kill yourself!'

She was very hurt and said, 'You shouldn't have done that.'

I still had the gun hidden and waited for a favourable opportunity to get rid of it. But in the meantime, my mistress and young Katherine returned from Sydney. Katherine was a great little girl, and although she was only twelve or thirteen, we were good friends, so I showed her the gun and said I was going to throw it in the river. I put it back in my locker and that was the last I saw of it. Katherine must have told her parents and they wisely confiscated it. I was thankful, but fearful in case they punished me. But I did not hear any more and that was the end of the whole thing.

I had turned twenty-one. Life still went on and I had even ceased dreaming of seeing the old people again. I did have dreams of marriage though. I saw a few nice, young white men who I admired from a distance, but never once spoke to. I guess they did not even notice that I existed. I was shy even of the young policeman whose duty it was to ride out once a month to see if we were getting on all right. I used to get self-conscious when Mr Maskey, the mistress's young brother, aged about twenty-six, would say, 'Here's your friend coming to see you.' When the poor young constable would ask me if I was getting on all right, I would clam up and not answer. He was embarrassed as well. He came all that distance and sometimes never spoke to me, but apparently noted all was well.

One day during the busy shearing season, the boss's wife was concerned that her husband had gone out to muster without the lunch she had cut. It had been left on the table. He had a long ride out to the back paddock where they were rounding up the sheep. I very quickly asked if I could ride the pony to take the lunch out. My mistress hesitated, knowing how many spills I had had, and said so. However, I promised I would be careful. Katherine helped me with the bridle and saddle. It seemed a long way, but the pony was very good, and for the first time I didn't fall off. I found the boss. He was surprised, but pleased at having his lunch brought. He had a bit of a grin on his face as I showed off by cantering away. I remembered that the washing up was waiting and the separator as well! It was in another part of the house and as I went round to wash it I saw a huge snake crawling up the side of the bench. He was after the drippings of the cream and milk. Remembering the tiger snake that had bitten my sister, I screamed, 'Snake!' The mistress was there in a second, but the snake got away and crawled under the verandah, under my room. I was terrified and

every time I saw a shadow, I imagined it was the snake.

One day I was standing on the verandah with Katherine and my mistress laughing at the antics of old Grace, the mother cat. She was jumping round, her paws threshing the air. When we saw she was fighting with a snake a shiver went right through me. Young Katherine cried out to the old cat and rushed to its rescue with me behind her. But the mistress stopped us. She quietly picked up a garden spade and just as quietly said, 'Hold him Gracie.' To my amazement the old cat held the snake firmly near its head while its tail was threshing wildly. Mrs Campbell calmly cut off its head. Grace, the mother of so many cats, walked away scornfully as much as to say, 'I could have made a better job of it.'

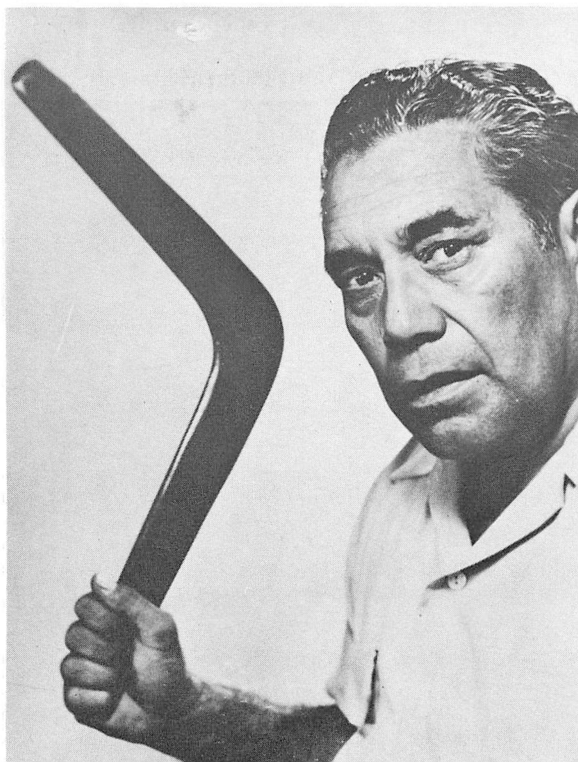
Once old Tommy, the father of most of the cats, had been missing for a week. He was a great favourite with everyone. Sometimes after he'd been hunting, we had to treat his wounds. We never knew what he had been fighting with, maybe a goanna or a dingo he had been too slow to escape from. Katherine was very upset when he was missing and we tried to console her. Then one day when we were walking through the garden to get vegetables from the old Chinese gardener, I saw a bit of fur blowing in the wind. We rushed around and found old Tom, who was still alive but on his last legs. His tail was moving slightly. Flies were all round his mouth. My mistress told Katherine to keep away. There were maggots round his mouth too. I had great admiration for Mrs Campbell, who prised that cat's mouth open and dragged out an ugly piece of bone wedged across the roof. He had been slowly starving to death. I remembered then a few days before old Tom had been trying to tell us he couldn't eat, by meowing piteously and rubbing against us. After a few days of nursing he was drinking his milk, giving himself a clean up, and soon recovered completely.

When the flood waters came, I had to dive in the river and help the boss's teen-age sons to clean out the debris that had got caught in the pipes of the engine used to pump water to the garden and up to the house for bathing purposes. (We used tank water for drinking and cooking.) It was embarrassing at first, as we wore swimming suits, in contrast to the dresses we had worn to swim as children. I was pretty shy until I realised it was an everyday occurrence and no one took any notice.

I shall never forget the weeks when everyone went down with influenza. The boss sent for his sister, who was a doctor. I was very frightened when I got the germ too. I was worried and thought 'I can't go to bed too.' Everyone else was down except the boss. So I cracked hardy, an old saying when you pretend to be tough. I guess most people know that feeling. When I started to cough and felt I could not breathe I longed for my mother and the old people at home. The doctor gave me some medicine. But the verandahs had to be scrubbed, the milk separated, and the special meals prepared for each sick person. When the doctor was tired, I made her a cup of tea. Sometimes we had it together. Everyone got better in the end, and I was surprised to find myself alive and still on my feet. I thanked God. When the boss said, 'Thank you girl, you did well,' that was all I wanted.

Above: A wedding ceremony at an Aboriginal Mission. (*Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 18 April 1868; courtesy National Library of Australia.)

Right: Bill Onus. (Photograph: Harry Jay.)



Right: This photograph of me was taken when I used to sing in concerts in aid of the Red Cross and other charities.

Below: At my mother's grave.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I DO NOT KNOW how long my sister and I would have been away from our people, but one day in the middle of the busy season, word came from the headquarters of the Aborigines Protection Board that May and I had to go home at once because old Uncle Osley Ingram was very ill and not expected to live. His dying wish was to see May and me before he passed on. The joy of going home was marred by the thought that we might not reach there in time. We packed our belongings in cases and the overflow in a big cardboard box. May's boss drove her from his place and my boss drove me the twenty-five miles to the railway station at Walgett. It was a long tiring journey, but we were going home, not to dear old Moonahculla, but to Barham township. A few of our people had moved there so as to make a fresh start in a white man's town,

where they could give their children education and what they felt was a better way of life, a white man's way!

One of my cousins came to the Koondrook railway station to drive us in the sulky to my uncle and aunt's house. The first thing he said was 'What a funny hat you've got on! How long have you had it?' I felt humiliated, as I had only just bought it and thought it a very pretty one. Needless to say, my sister and I soon discovered how old-fashioned we were dressed!

Arriving at the old iron shanty home, it was refreshing to find a garden of flowers blooming, and a vegetable patch on the little plot of land that they were trying to buy on the outskirts of the town of Barham.

Our uncle was conscious for about an hour after we arrived, and then passed away. It was a big funeral. There were wild flowers and garden flowers and gum leaves on his coffin. He was buried in the Barham cemetery in the vicinity of his ancient tribal grounds. People laughed at his pack of rabbit dogs as they followed the buggies to the cemetery. That was about fifty years ago.

My old aunt died in the Deniliquin hospital eighteen years later, lonely and uncared for by her people. I didn't even know she was ill but I should have and I still feel guilty. I found out a week after she died. My heart still aches. She was buried in a lonely grave in Deniliquin. I heard the details later and mourned for my neglect. But I feel she is at peace now. She and old Uncle helped many people, both dark and white. Aunt would not listen to any scandal. She was like the three wise monkeys who saw no evil, heard no evil and spoke no evil.

I had been nine years away in domestic service and I had earned between £70 and £80 in that time. Our weekly wage was banked by the government and the only money I was given directly was my 6d a week pocket money, increasing to 1/- a week after the first year.

After our old uncle was buried, May and I easily fitted in again with our people—with their joys and their sorrows. I will never forget those first few months at home with my people. Cold, rainy weather, draughty homes, the walls made from material found on the tip, covered with hessian and newspapers. Everyone got ill, mostly the 'flu.

Sometimes we would get one of our menfolk to cut and bring in a big log that would be fitted into the back of our wide fire-place. It would last for days if we had just a small fire, but when we allowed it to burn fiercely it would burn away quickly and get too hot and we would have to open a door or window to let in the cold air. The changes in temperature must have caused our colds and influenza. When we got sick we would gather 'old man weed' and make a brew. Amongst our people, it is known as a cure for a wide range of ailments. Nowadays it is known among some white people too. We rubbed goanna fat onto our chests and between the shoulder blades, but it was hard to get, living as we were in a township. White man's medicine was out of reach, as we had no money to pay for it. I cannot remember a public hospital nearer than Deniliquin.

My mother had helped my aunt to care for old Uncle before he died, sitting with him night and day. Many others of our old and young people helped in this way too, which was the custom when Aborigines knew the end was near. Mother was not so young now and she had got tired helping Aunt and really needed a rest, but she still went to work at some of the homes in the town. May and I got a day's work now and then, which helped to tide us over those hard times.

Our grandfather, George Middleton, the story of whose farm I have already told, had sold it and bought a small place in Moama, which is on the New South Wales side of the Murray River from Echuca. But as he grew older he

was in need of care, so Mother and old Aunt Ethel and a younger aunt brought him to Barham, where they could look after him. Most of it fell on Mother's shoulders, but old Aunt and the younger aunt helped as much as they could. He passed away peacefully in Barham. His wish was to be buried at Cummeragunga near his wife and family. He was between eighty and ninety years of age, but his birth had never been registered. Aboriginal babies at the time he was born were not registered.

When Grandfather died his white relations, who I have reason to believe had been in touch with him and watched his life's progress, asked if his daughters could spend a holiday at their home. Their tribal pride prevented this, but I think they were very touched and pleased. However, Mother and Aunt did not discuss this with us their children till years after, and then not enough for us to find out who the white relations were. Perhaps it was better so, who knows?

We, the remnants of our tribe, are still proud. I find it hard to keep calm and peaceful when I see the plight of some of our people and the misunderstandings and divisions between them, where once there was real dignity and humbleness. Perhaps that is a thing of the past, but no, I believe unity will come when black and white want it and work and fight for it together through honesty and care for one another.

I liked Barham: the names of the towns, Barham, Koondrook, Kerang, Barmah were all familiar to me, and tales of Kow Swamp where old Uncles Osley and Billy Ingram and other relations' tribes had roamed and been buried for thousands of years before. Old Billy Ingram took his older brother's place as head of those remaining of their tribe. I have seen that stately, kindly old man, slow to anger, tell a white man who dug up the remains of the people of his tribe that if he so much as put another foot

on that sacred burial ground, he would not live to be sorry. It is as fresh in my memory as though it happened yesterday.

I know that as time goes on there will be many fossils and remains of our Murray River district tribes found there amongst our burial grounds and along the Edwards River, the Wakool and the Murrumbidgee. But I feel strongly that these remains should not be disturbed unnecessarily, and I beg archaeologists and scientists to be sensitive with what they may unearth. The educated Aboriginal youths of today are ignorant of the history of their forebears. Very few elderly Aboriginal people who have the stories of the past are living now in the states of Victoria and New South Wales. Of those who do know, some use their knowledge wisely, others use it to create hurts and misery that cause more division. At demonstrations for Aboriginal rights one sees many different colours. When liquor is used irresponsibly to create Dutch courage, more gaps of misunderstanding are caused and some Aboriginal spokesmen appear undignified and unreasonable. News of such demonstrations and divisions gets carried all over the world. So many people do not realise that only a handful of Aboriginals act like this and often because the white man's liquor is in them. God alone knows the answer to the hurts, frustrations and bitterness of any people. Our problems did not get like this overnight and human nature being the same everywhere, we are not the only people who have troubles. Colour is not the issue, the answer is there for all to see: not *who* is right, but *what* is right. The Aborigines can become an asset to this country.

I am thrilled at the knowledge that has come through archaelogists and scientists about the Aborigines. To me, it is as though the ancients are trying to relay a message not only to the Aboriginal race, but to the human race. Do

we flatter ourselves that we today are better off than our forebears were? Perhaps in a few material possessions, but what peace of mind and heart have we? We will never know what peace of mind and heart they had either.

I make many mistakes, and don't always have the courage to right those mistakes, but as long as I live, I pray that with God's help, I can fight that old snake of hate and bitterness when he rears his head. That fight does bring peace of mind.

I will not forget the dignity and kindliness of our old people, how they shared what they had with any human being, white or dark.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

YOUNG ABORIGINAL GIRLS who couldn't easily find work in the country often drifted to Melbourne. A few had relatives there, whose homes acted as stepping-stones while the girls found their feet and were able to look for a job. These families, though struggling themselves, shared what they had. Two families I remember when I first came to Melbourne, were those of our old school teacher, Mr James, and Auntie Grace Bux, the mother of two children I'd gone to school with at Cummeragunga. Her home was in Capel Street, North Melbourne.

Auntie Grace was trying, in those hard times of the 1920s, to let rooms, but she seldom found tenants who paid, until they found a job of course. I was one of these. My sister Evelyn was boarding with Aunt Grace too. She was nearly eighteen and offered to help pay my board from

her own wages until I got a job. It was generous of her as she did not earn much as a factory worker.

Aunt Grace's son was married to a white girl. They had two children. He had a beautiful singing voice and was well known. He sang in hotels and often gave his services for good causes such as the Children's Hospital appeals. When he died a couple of years ago, he was in his seventies. He was crippled then, but managed to get about in a wheel chair, and sang until he died. His wife looked after him and cared for him until the end.

After three years working at Burumbil station, and meeting very few people, I was shy, especially of men. I was conscious that I was a bit old-fashioned, a country bumpkin as the saying goes. However, I had three proposals of marriage while I was in Barham, two from Aborigines, both of whom were good workers, and the other from a white man. I turned him down as he was shorter than I was, although a nice fellow. I wasn't ready for romance in any colour or form. At Cummeragunga I remember I also had two proposals during a short stay there. Both of the men married afterwards, and now have big families. Their wives are friends of mine. They were all pretty, young women.

I was a bit scared of marriage. Before I left Barham, my mother was the midwife to a young Aboriginal woman who was having her first baby. Our custom is to visit the baby immediately after birth. He was just half an hour old, a dear, cuddly little fellow lying in his proud mother's arms. My mother, who was in the midst of cleaning up the afterbirth, called to us four girls: 'Margaret, May, Evelyn and Geraldine, come here, I wish you to see this and learn.' We were curious to see what she wanted to show us. My sisters did not show their feelings, perhaps they may already have helped Mother or someone else at a birth. But I was quite shaken, as Mother explained everything. I

stayed as long as I felt I could, then bolted for home. After that I couldn't think of marriage without shuddering.

One Aborigine pursued me during those few days at Cummeragunga, but I made sure I was always with groups of people, so that he couldn't get me on his own. However, he was a determined suitor, and sent a note over to where I was staying saying his mother would like to meet me before I left for Melbourne. I begged two girl friends to accompany me, and, with misgivings, I went to his home. His mother was a gracious woman who kept her home well. I liked her instantly and was glad to get to know her. Later on I did find myself alone with her tall good-looking son. I panicked for a few moments. But he was kind and nice, and simply asked me to marry him. I wasn't afraid of him after that. I liked him very much, but as I had only known him a few days, I told him I would write and we could get to know each other better that way. I did make an attempt to write but with trying to find a job and other pressures in a new situation I left off.

The depression overtook us. I walked off my shoe leather looking for a job, but I felt free and everything was a challenge. Finding a job became an obsession. One day I walked all the way to St Kilda. I did not know the way, but asked for direction several times. Another day I answered an advertisement for a nurse girl to two small children. A young woman came to the door and I got the job! The children were two boys about two and four. The work was easy and the parents were charming business people, very modern. I never felt like a servant there. I was taken for car drives with my mistress and the boys, and sometimes for picnics. I was still terribly shy and my tongue would go numb when her husband tried to talk with me. He was very kind, but smart and sophisticated. I learned a lot from this young mistress, who was charming, gay, and I thought beautiful. She had a good singing voice. We were

more like friends. She trusted me.

Sometimes when I was in the midst of doing my work, she would say, 'Please take the children to the park or down to the beach'—which was not far away. She wanted to do some writing or something else. She would usher me out saying she would finish the work. They asked me if I would like to have meals with them or by myself with the boys. I said I would prefer to have it with the boys. I heard that the boys excelled themselves in the Army in the last World War. As I did with all the children I looked after, I became very fond of them, and they responded. We all loved to walk in the park and go to the beach at Elwood.

On my day off, the only place I knew to go was Auntie Grace's. She was gay and her daughter Dolly was like a sister and had stayed with us many times at Cummeragunga. The other girls and my young sister who stayed with Auntie Grace, and her husband Scottie, would go out to their particular entertainments and I guessed that I must be too countrified still for them to take me. But I loved to talk with Auntie Grace and Scottie. One day, Dolly asked me if I would like to go to a party with her. Before I could reply, Evelyn said, 'No Doll, leave her, she will want to go home early.' I felt indignant and said—against my better judgment, because I was still ridiculously shy—'I would love to go with you.'

So Dolly did my hair and painted and powdered my face. I secretly rubbed the stuff off before I got to the party, which was the first one I'd been to in Melbourne.

It was well conducted, and I was introduced to everyone. Trays of drinks were taken round by the hostess, who praised me when I refused. She went and got me a soft drink. A young, dapper little fellow came in and was greeted by everyone. I didn't take much notice of him or of any of the men who were enjoying themselves. I enjoyed myself just looking and admiring the pretty dresses the

ladies were wearing. Dolly did all the talking, I was mostly dumb. The dapper young man seemed to know everybody. He said Hello to Dolly and me.

When we got home, Doll got to telling everyone about the 'swell' party we had been to—that Squizzy Taylor was at. My sister looked shocked.

'Oh no, you didn't take Margaret there!' she said.

Dolly replied, 'Of course I did, you all went out and left her.'

I asked why they were all shocked, and who was Squizzy Taylor? I learned that he was a wanted gunman.

When I got over my fright I said: 'He seemed nice, and I didn't see any guns.'

I then listened to many stories about him. It was my first and last party for a long time!

But I slowly got used to people, both sexes, and they all treated me with respect. I went home now and again to see my old aunt and mother, who was sometimes visiting Cummeragunga. I remember old Aunt going out rabbiting to Tulla station with her pack of dogs. She would not eat rabbit flesh no matter how hungry she was, but she sold the rabbit skins. Too much rabbit flesh was not good even for the dogs she said. They would get thin and waste away if they did not have a varied diet. Old Aunt would harness up the horses to the four-wheel buggy. She would spot squatting rabbits and was such a straight shot with the rifle she could get them through the head and kill them instantly.

The old Aboriginal people did not get government rations or pensions then, and how they lived and died was nobody's business. It makes me quite ill with remorse when I reflect on how I could have helped those beloved aged Aborigines, especially lonely old Aunt, who never complained or asked for anything. Young people can be selfish without knowing.

I remember I was working at that time, getting twenty-two shillings a week in Melbourne. I had the thought to send ten shillings home to old Aunt. A letter came back promptly saying, 'God bless you, my girl, thank you.' She went on to say she had been hungry and had no food, but when she got my letter with the ten shillings, she went down the town and bought sausages, tea, sugar and vegetables, and bones for her dogs, who were her only company. She thanked me several times in that letter. I am far from young now and shed tears when I remember how neglected she was. How many young folk selfishly or unthinkingly neglect their old loved ones who did without for such as I. Money is necessary for sure, but love and care for all people, no matter what colour or age, is more important. I feel a certain consolation in the thought that I shall join her and my loved ones in spirit, in our beloved country's earth, which owns us and cradles us when we are tired and go to that last long sleep. In peace, I shall join my ancestors in the old camping grounds.

It would make my story too long to go into the struggles of young Aborigines in the cities in those days. I felt the divisions between dark and white deeply and devoured books containing views on the Aborigines. I felt we were not the lowest in intellect, but perhaps the least advanced of coloured people. I noticed that even coloured people from overseas would often not mix with us. I got to feeling discontented with my people's lot, and wondered in my heart what was the answer. Were we Aborigines only meant to be used as servants of white people? The thought came to me to 'marry a white man' so that my children would be light-skinned and have an equal opportunity to live as the white children. How ignorant and wrong I was! I had loved a young Aboriginal man to whom I used to write when I worked in Sydney, but he had got married to another Aborigine.

Well, I did marry a white man. He was in the Navy. His family was very proud. I cannot tell of the heartaches of that early part of my marriage, because of my black skin. My husband left the Navy, but could not find a job in those days of the depression. We went to Barham, where my baby girl was born under my mother's care in old Aunt's partly-completed shack. My husband returned to Melbourne in search of a job. We didn't have any food in the shack for days at a time. The Aboriginal people scattered in Barham would tactfully share what little food they had, until I heard one little girl, home from school, ask her mother for a piece of bread. Her mother replied that there wasn't any, and said she didn't know where the next lot was coming from. I was shocked and ashamed that I had been eating the food their children should have had. I quietly went back to old Auntie's shack. I sat down and once more wrote to my husband pleading with him to send money for food for our baby. I did not realise that he was still out of work and that his people were keeping him. They had come only recently from Tasmania where they were well-known pioneers, highly respected. They had been very upset when they heard that their son had married an unknown Aboriginal girl, not full-blooded, but brown-skinned.

I did not hear from my husband, but instead received a letter from his sister, who sent my fare and asked us to come straight away to them. I found out later that the sister had been pressing her brother's suit for him to wear in search of a job. She came across my letter in his pocket. I don't think he meant to ignore us, but he was helpless to do anything and too afraid to ask his family.

His sisters were angry with him and his mother said I must come to them. I had not realised the heartache and shame an Aboriginal girl could bring to a white family in those days by marrying their son. I did not realise either

the heartache or the tears that I would shed when I saw what I had done. Every time their friends came, I made myself scarce. They did not tell me to, but I sensed it was better so. I would cry my heart out. It served me right I knew. Out of three white men who asked me to marry them, why did I have to love the wrong one! Why didn't I marry one of my own people?

But they adored my little girl, and I came to accept them and fit in with their routines. I later on got jobs. It tore the heart out of me to leave my little girl with them, but they were good to her, especially grandma and grandpa. My father-in-law, who was a JP, in my opinion from the first did not worry what colour I was. He was understanding and kind. In spite of everything I grew fond of them. Gradually, to my secret delight, they started to introduce me to their friends, 'This is Marge,' but the old man would say, 'This is my daughter-in-law.' One day the youngest brother, who had been on my bus sitting right at the back, while I was in the front, told his mother he felt the way people were staring at me was terrible, and he thought they were not fit to wipe my shoes. My feelings were sky-high when I heard that, not so much because of what he said, but because it showed his affection for me. He was a shy boy, and had hardly ever held a conversation with me. On my mother-in-law's death bed, I realised how I had grown to love this family and especially the old people. As I wept, her last words were, 'We all love you for yourself.' I have treasured those words from a very proud white lady, because it made me feel it was worth trying to live without bitterness and hate in one's heart. Thank God that real care and love can conquer, and I repeat again that colour isn't the issue, it is character.

When the Second World War started, my mother-in-law and family and I had not seen their son, my husband, for two years. Then he came home in his uniform. On his

final leave he spent those last precious days with me and our little girl, who was now twelve. She was very proud of him and to be honest I was too. I shall not forget the parting, wondering whether we would see him again. He put his arms around our little girl, and we wept together and for months we would weep as we thought of him.

After he left I put my heart into doing war work. I got work at Kinnears rope works in Footscray, a huge place. The boss, a tall fair man, interviewed me and asked if I were Italian. I had long since lost my fear of men.

'My goodness,' I said, 'Italians would not be flattered to hear you ask me that question! For one thing, they have straight noses, while mine is a flat Aboriginal nose. Besides, I feel they need work too.'

Mr Kinnear explained that the Australian workers would not work with them, as we were at war with Italy.

'Some were born and bred here,' I said and my heart ached for them.

This kindly boss took me around the works and asked which machine I would like to use. My mind went blank. I had not used or worked anything like these in my life, but my pride would not let him or the workers see that I was plumb scared. In my pride I chose a huge ninety-six bobbin machine, with ninety-six strings running through it. I had to keep the strings from breaking on those ninety-six bobbins. The strings had to pass through containers of water as the machine worked. The water made things a bit damp and the cement floor was slippery.

A red-headed young man taught me how to use it. I asked him how long it took to learn and he replied three weeks, but he was a good teacher and I learned it all in a little less than that time. I loved that long powerful machine and working at Kinnears rope factory. From the bosses—the Kinnear brothers—down the workers were all my friends. My cousin Sally Russell and her son worked

there as well. The Christmas breakups were something to remember. We would have a concert in the canteen and good things to eat and drink. Max Reddy and Stella Lamont, two well-known singers, were asked to entertain at one of these. Comedians too came to entertain us. To my amazement and fright, I was asked to sing too, my workmates coaxing and bullying when I said 'No, I don't have the courage.' But I did. I sang *Silent Night* in English and then in the Aboriginal Aranda tongue. The workers were all merry and gave me a good clap, stamping the floor.

I regretfully had to leave the factory because with the dampness of the work I was doing I continually caught colds, which I found hard to throw off.

I heard that they wanted workers at the ammunition factory. I think they saw that I was an Aboriginal. They hesitated until they read on the form I had filled in that my husband was overseas in the war zone. Then they took me on. I liked working there. There was a lovely big canteen with a stage and music. I shuddered at the bullets we were making, but I enjoyed working the machines. There were three shifts and on night shifts we would start singing to keep awake while we worked. The whole works would join in. I couldn't help myself, I loved singing and would go for my life on the top notes.

Our forelady formed a committee to sing at the military hospital at Heidelberg. We loved doing that, and would shed tears when we would go the next time only to find a bed empty, where a friendly lad had passed on. One day we were passing a ward where a young soldier was standing at the door.

'Why can't you come and sing here, no one visits us,' he said. I asked the head sister and she said these men had tuberculosis and anyone going in had to be careful. I thought that was nothing. I had lived on Aboriginal

Planting a eucalypt at 'Armagh', Melbourne, in honour of Queen Salote of Tonga, whose guest I was in 1964. (Photograph: Dennis Mayor.)

This was taken in 1960, outside the church in Gundagai where my parents were married.

Settlements where TB was a constant killer. I told the sister and begged her to let us visit them and said I was sure we would be OK. We Aboriginal members of our concert party put those men before all the others, and every one of us wanted to cheer them because they had given so much for us.

My husband had been in Tobruk and was then sent to Papua-New Guinea, part of the cleaning-up operations to send the Japanese back home. His praise for the 'fuzzy-wuzzy angels' was great. He got malaria, as did many of the soldiers. It was a nasty disease. I remember him getting an attack after he came home. I telephoned for an ambulance to take him to the repatriation hospital. While I stood by as he was being made comfortable, one of the ambulance nurses in khaki uniform said in a business-like way, looking at me, 'Who is this, she shouldn't be here.' I didn't answer, but although my husband was so ill, he got angry and shouted, 'She has every right to be here, she is my wife.' My heart went out to him as the ambulance took him away.

But the war divided so many families—pitiful cases. The young men who went away, those who came home again, all needed such love and care, only to find wives who didn't know how to respond to their many needs and moods. Many drifted apart like we did. I for one am sorry for my thoughtlessness and lack of understanding.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MY HUSBAND'S PARENTS went to live in Hastings, Victoria, where they managed an orchard, in about 1933. He was much in demand for his experience, although at that time he was getting on in years. Mollie, my daughter, went to live with them when she was five years old and went to school there, walking through the scrub, She learned to help round the farm, milking the cows and feeding the fowls. When she grew older, we felt it would be better for her to go to a boarding school, and she went to a well-known convent in Abbotsford. Mollie got a great start in her education there. She loved the Sisters in that Convent during the seven years she was there. At weekends I would take her and several other white children for outings. During the holidays she would stay with her grandfather and grandmother at

Hastings. She loved music and learned to play the piano, violin and guitar, ukelele and autoharp. She had a wonderful ear for music and perfect pitch.

Meanwhile I had nowhere to go, but some friends who were involved with the Communist cause took me in. I was ignorant about how Australia was run, about politics or any of the 'isms' of those times. But what I had been taught by my mother and old aunt and uncle through strict discipline mingled with loving kindness, together with the missionary teaching, stuck to my inner being.

I had now learned to use my singing voice, and was much sought after for concerts and entertainments. It was wonderful fun for a young Aboriginal woman who from childhood had seen her people suffer hurts and indignities and had been too miserable to speak up against them. I remember putting my hand out to greet someone only to have it refused and to be given a 'how d'ye do' in return. The white worshippers in one village church shunned us, and the Aborigines were told to get their own church.

While inwardly timid and quick to see and feel slights, I was popular at dances and concerts and at parties as part of the entertainment in what were described as high-class homes or society homes. I would take my ukelele along and feel happy there singing, singing, singing. After a few drinks, I remember sitting on a chair with these society people around me on the lush carpet singing *Way Down upon the Swannee River, Old Black Joe, Carry me Back to Old Virginny, Sweet Genevieve* and others. I would hear them saying 'She speaks beautiful English' or 'Her English is better than ours,' and one lady snapped back, 'You speak for yourself.' When the party was over, I would be driven back to the beautiful home where I was a maid of all work. Just as well, as it brought me right down to earth and reality. I was just an Aboriginal maid, getting to love parties and all that that kind of life stood for.

Then a white woman asked me to sing at a concert in a church to help the Aborigines living in Fitzroy. That was the beginning of understanding and working for my people and others. I worked with well-known Aboriginal families who lived there, the Lovetts, the Clarkes from Framlingham, families from Purnim and Condah, and a little later, the Taylors. Jessie Taylor was a King before marriage. She came from Lake Condah. She was a great contributor at socials and concerts as she played the piano accordian and the piano beautifully. She has since passed on, but her daughter Joyce is like a daughter to me.

We were all working to better Aboriginal conditions, but we were often a long way from demonstrating the positive answer the world needs.

Two of the helpers were the late Mr Claude Smith and his wife Nora. I worked in their home, which was more like my own home because I was treated like one of their own family. Mrs Smith used to help me cut out and sew dresses, and make hula skirts for our concerts that we gave to aid such causes as the Red Cross or kindergarten schools. It was nothing for Mr and Mrs Smith to have a large group use their home for concert practice, or to have twenty Aborigines to a Sunday roast dinner, complete with plum pudding. We were all fitted in round their table somehow. After the meal, everyone would help clear the table and wash up.

Then we would all go into the sitting room round their piano and sing a mixture of grand old hymns, songs and Aboriginal songs, which we often learned from each other and sang in different dialects. We would accompany each other on the guitar, ukelele, mandolin, banjo and gum leaves. It was clean enjoyment. Mr Smith would play his ukelele too. He bought ukeleles for those who didn't own one. The Smith children were like our brothers and their friends were our friends. This great family were pioneers

of early Footscray. He was a Justice of the Peace, an estate agent, and a leader in many affairs. His wife had a gentle personality, but she was a great force in that home.

I became treasurer of the first Aboriginal organisation formed in Victoria—it was named the Aborigines League. When I look back, I wonder where on earth I found the courage to take on the job. However, it wasn't so hard, as we had very little money given to us and so, as treasurer, I didn't have much to do.

Many young Aborigines won 'gifts' in sports including the late Selwyn Briggs, my sister Geraldine's husband. He was a cousin of Sir Douglas Nicholls. We all went to school together at Cummeragunga. Sir Douglas was a 'gift' winner and a famous footballer in the Fitzroy football club. The Cummeragunga football team were premiers of the district for seven years running. A lot could be told about the sportsmanship of Aborigines and their struggles to maintain it in those old days on Aboriginal Settlements, managed by white men some of whom were fine men and tried to give their best. Our people responded. Aboriginal choirs were trained at Cummeragunga and at Lake Tyers by Mr Bruce Ferguson, who was manager of both stations at different times.

An outstanding young man of that day was Jack Patten, one of six children.

He enlisted in the Second World War and went away with the Second AIF to the Middle East. He was a great practical joker and got into many scrapes in his regiment. On one occasion he wanted leave to go and get a drink and smokes, which was out of bounds. He was refused, so he tried to slip out dressed as an Arab, but was caught by the Australian military police and run back into barracks.

Jack and his young brother George were close friends, so much so that what was Jack's was George's and vice

versa. At one point George had quite a big roll of notes he wished to keep to himself, but knowing Jack, he realised he must hide it away. Jack watched him like a hawk as they sat together on their beds. Thinking he would give George the opportunity to hide the roll under his bed or somewhere else where Jack would find it easily, he said, 'I'll go outside for a bit of fresh air.'

They went to bed, and in the morning Jack scratched his head and said 'Where on earth did you hide that money?'

George shouted with laughter and said, 'You get up, and I'll show you.' He lifted up Jack's own bed and there was the roll of notes. Jack had been sleeping on it all night!

Like so many of our people Jack had got initiated into drinking the white man's liquor in order to drown his sorrows. I have heard some Aborigines say the only time they were treated as the equal of the white man was over the counter in the hotel.

Jack came through the war without a scratch, but broke his leg on the ship as he travelled home. He was cared for in a military hospital in Sydney. Jack and George went through very hard times, unable to get work, living on sustenance and hand-outs, jumping trains to get around and interstate between Sydney and Melbourne. They worked hard to bring the plight of Aborigines to the notice of white Australians. They were two of the most daring Aborigines. Gifted speakers, they were much in demand by Aborigines and white people who sought to take up the Aboriginal cause. Some of these were sincere, although there were often some undesirable elements amongst them. George spent most of his time in Victoria, but Jack worked in both states. He had started school in Cummeragunga, but later went to schools in Tumbarumba and Wyalong. His father, my

mother's brother-in-law, (also called Jack) was a police black tracker in Wyalong and that area. Tales of his findings were never-ending. He always went with the police on sheep and cattle stealing cases, and often on cases of murder. Uncle Jack Patten did not talk about himself, but his white and dark friends loved telling stories of his powers of observation.

On one occasion Uncle went with the police to investigate the murder of a white woman and her son in a bush hut. Her other son told the police he had gone home and found them murdered. Uncle Jack found a bloodstained axe cunningly hidden in the bush. He went to a gum tree where he noticed recent axe marks. The jagged edge of the axe he'd found matched up with the marks in the tree and on wood left on the wood heap, which led him to believe that the brother himself was the murderer. Further clever sleuthing proved this to be the case. On another occasion the police were called out to deal with cattle stealing. As usual they took Uncle Jack. They found nothing, but persevered and went out again several times. One night they went to an outback cottage. While the police were snooping around outside, Uncle Jack went inside where he found a game of cards in progress on a long kitchen table. He sat down on the wooden bench families used in those days. Uncle Jack noticed that the men were trying not to be fidgety and as he watched his hands were feeling around underneath the table. He discovered there was a furry substance nailed underneath. Later the men were charged with the stealing of the cattle and selling their skins to a gang of crooks.

In the country towns where young Jack lived there were schools and so opportunities for education. He won a scholarship and was put into the Navy for training as a midshipman. He was about fourteen at the time. But he didn't stay away long. He was homesick and ran away

back to his dusky family. I remember how all our families were disappointed, especially our grandfather, George Middleton.

Jack was married after some time and had a family, but he was always restless, partly because of his concern about his people's plight: Aborigines from the various Settlements would seek out Jack or write to him, pleading with him to come and help them and give them ideas about taking action. They were desperate days. A new generation of white managers were now in charge of the Aboriginal Settlements. Some were understanding men and were prepared to learn, others were arrogant and created favourites, or encouraged tale-carriers. That was brought home to me when I visited my sister May, who was ill. I went to look after her. I admit I was ready to believe everything that was said about this particular manager on the station where she was living. I heard that he often spoke about the Aboriginal men as 'black b. . . . . . .s'. Now I feel that with real care and fight, we could have helped that manager and his wife to understand us.

Jack Patten arrived at Cummeragunga after being sent for by the majority of the Aborigines. He was told by the manager to get off the Reserve. The Aborigines decided that if Jack wasn't allowed to stay at Cummeragunga, they wouldn't stay there either. So, sacrificing their dole—their only means of livelihood in those days of depression—they followed Jack across the River Murray onto the Victorian side at Barmah. The descendants of the Ulupna, my mother's tribe, the Yorta Yorta, Wirrardjerie and other tribes—mothers, fathers, babies, children and elderly people—all tracked across the same land that had belonged to us in our tribal days.

The Aborigines pitched camp near Barmah and then their real hardships began. There was no milk for the

babies, no food, no government rations. I am sure those who did not leave Cummeragunga as well as local farmers must have helped with milk for those families. The rule was that our people had to be three months in Victoria before they were eligible for the dole or rations. So there was a bit of sheep stealing and petty thieving! The police came out from Echuca but did not find anything. The evidence was right there under their noses, but perhaps they were too kind-hearted to make a charge. The police from both sides of the river were there when the Aborigines tracked from Cummeragunga. Jack Patten was arrested in Barmah on the Victorian side of the river by the New South Wales police from Moama, the town on that side of the river.

But meanwhile my sister May, sick as she was, sent a telegram given her by Jack before he was arrested, addressed to a well-known publisher and book shop in Macquarie Street, Sydney. The result was that Jack was out on bail within half an hour of being put in gaol.

Those of us living in Melbourne walked our shoe leather thin, cadging food for the protesters. I went so far as to flirt with a taxi driver, begging him to carry food free up to the Cummeragunga refugees. We were given meat by Angliss, the butcher in the city of Melbourne, and canned food, medicine and sugar by other people. By the time the taxi driver reached Mooroopna, he was on our side and keen to help all he could. He bought two big bags of flour, more sugar and plenty of fruit. His car was piled high with food. Our people were very grateful. On the return journey to Melbourne that good-hearted taxi driver had a blow-out and his car was damaged. It cost him a lot of money to get repaired. He was a sincere, good friend. Others in Sydney did all they could too.

Most of the protesters refused to go back to Cummeragunga. They had little food and now no schooling for

their children. Some travelled to Mooroopna and Shepparton. The hardships suffered by Selwyn Briggs and his family are an example. He and Geraldine got material to make a shelter in Dash's paddock in Mooroopna from rubbish dumps. I can remember Selwyn with his face tied up, suffering from a swollen gland and neuritis, struggling to make a makeshift shelter, my sister helping too. She was just skin and bone. They had four children at that time. Other families were in the same position, but they were all determined to make a go of things. Many felt they were far from welcome in the towns.

Some of the Aborigines from the Cummeragunga walk-off camped down near the banks of the River Goulburn. It was very hard carrying water up those steep banks. One old woman fell and broke her leg trying to get a can of water up. She was cared for at the Mooroopna hospital. Years later, their children's children took part in an effort to raise funds for this same hospital, where so many of our people have been cared for. Some have died there, including my own mother.

When the fruit season began there was work: tomato and fruit picking, packing and canning—work at which the Aboriginal men and women excelled.

Selwyn with his wife and family became respected citizens of Mooroopna and Shepparton. Geraldine has her own home in Shepparton and others of our people too. Many were helped by the original Aborigines Welfare Board and later by the Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs.

Bill Onus, another great worker for the Aborigines, went to school at Cummeragunga while I was there. Bill had an art shop in Belgrave where he sold artifacts. It was a rallying place for all of us Aborigines late in the 1940s and 1950s. Bill had one son and two daughters—one has

passed on—and his granddaughter Christina studied at a technical college in Melbourne. Bill's first wife was my first cousin. I believe Bill would have been a great asset today had he lived, in helping to bring understanding on both sides, dark and white. He had a gift for making friends. Many Aborigines worked together at that time to bring understanding between dark and white Australians, as we began to realise that we Aborigines could voice our people's need for equal opportunities.

Bill would often invite our musical group to his shop to entertain his guests at the weekends. It was situated in wild, bushy surroundings. We loved the shop, which sold bark paintings, the many different types of native spears, *nulla-nullas,* message sticks, totem poles and boomerangs of many tribes. Bill would give an exhibition of boomerang throwing. He was an artist at this, and would throw the boomerang high in the air, soaring over the tops of huge gum trees, and then step forward to catch it as it approached him. It would come right into his outstretched hand. We Aborigines would never tire of watching. He loved his art and would delight the visiting tourists and celebrities he invited by telling them interesting tales of each article and how our people used them.

He had erected a small stage that fitted in with the growth of bush and ferns and the hill in the background. A stream flowed under the stage. There would be Aboriginal songs, corroborees and other entertainment. Jessie Taylor, Joyce Johnson her daughter, Eric and Winnie Onus (Bill's brother and sister-in-law) and Bill himself would join in. Others would accompany with the piano accordian, guitar, ukeleles and the gum leaf. The gum leaves were played chiefly by Bill and Eric and Aborigines from Lake Tyers. Through the music we loved, we expressed our joys and sadness and our legends.

One Sunday afternoon Bill had asked us to go out as usual. We always enjoyed meeting the celebrities. I remember Alan Marshall was there on this particular afternoon. Apart from his fame as a writer, he has inspired many people including the Aborigines to forget about their aches and pains, because of his own courage in overcoming his disability. He was so nice and dignified. I don't remember him being in a wheel chair at that time.

The other people that day were from overseas, Maoris and white New Zealanders. We liked them so much that we invited them and the Australians who were with them, to come to an evening to meet others of our people. It was to be at the home of Alex and Meryl Jackomas. That was about eighteen years ago. We had lots of singing that evening and chatting. They were all genuine people I remember, and I asked one of them to speak about the work they all seemed to be interested in. To my surprise a lady got to her feet and everyone quietened down to listen as she told about Moral Re-Armament. We had learned earlier that her husband was a Wing Commander in the RAAF during the Second World War, and was one of the first pilots to be trained in the First World War.

Having thanked the host and hostess for the party and for meeting our people, she went on:

'I am glad to have the opportunity to say from my heart how sorry I am for my superiority as a white Australian, and for our treatment, as whites, of the Australian Aboriginal race. Would you please forgive?'

She said further that she felt that dark and white Australians could work together to help make Australia the land that God meant it to be. Australians could give the right ideas to the world by creating a pattern in the way we live. They were words I shall never forget. It was

the first time I had heard such words said to us Aborigines. It touched my heart and the hearts of many there that evening. It was the beginning of a friendship between dark and white Australians.

After that she had Aborigines to visit many times, giving us cups of tea, taking us for drives, and eating meals in her lovely home. That great woman, like a sister to me, has passed on now leaving her husband, Eric Roberts, who is known to Aborigines far and wide. Their son is now a university lecturer in Papua-New Guinea. Eric has just had his eighty-third birthday.

I have never ceased to be thankful for meeting such people and many like them, black and white, from other lands. They not only spoke about change in their own lives, but showed that it could be lived in any home anywhere by all races across the world, including Aborigines! Their lives were a challenge—a hard one—but they showed me how to live straight, not in the self-righteous phoney way I had been living. I owe a lot to Bill Onus for the friendships I made at that time.

When Harold Blair the Aboriginal singer first came to Melbourne from Queensland, Marjorie Lawrence, the famous Australian soprano, gave him great praise and encouragement, and said his voice should be trained. We were very proud of him and still are, of him and his family. He started an Aboriginal choir in Melbourne and trained us wonderfully, quite an achievement, as although most Aborigines have a good ear for music, few have any training. Harold had a great sense of humour that kept us on tenterhooks. One evening during rehearsal he interrupted a tricky song he was teaching us, and pointing his baton at me said sternly, 'Mrs Tucker!'

I was keyed up trying to do my best and dreaded being scolded in front of anyone. 'Yes' I said, very curtly, as everyone was listening.

He grinned and said, 'You remind me of my mother.'

I gasped and thought to myself, 'I wish you were my son, I would give you a spanking for giving me such a fright.' But it meant so much to hear him say that. I shall always treasure his mother's friendship.

Harold learned to know us all and was eager to help us out in almost anything. He was an escort for one of the bridesmaids at my daughter's wedding. Harold's wife Dorothy has a glorious singing voice too, and worked hard at Harold's side for the Aborigines.

About that time, he formed an organisation to help Aborigines who had little food or material goods. He asked me and a white woman to help him with this as he was an extremely busy young man with his musical studies. It was my first experience of the giving of the ordinary white Australian. I learned that white Australians can be generous. Many have been true friends to the Aboriginal race. Others have had evil intent. As time went on, I had become a restless sort of being. I had tried everything, but was still muddled and troubled, fighting against whites who were fighting against blacks. I have since discovered that division is encouraged by those who wish to use people of all races to divide and destroy, so they can gain their own ends.

I sometimes ask myself what would have happened if God had not given His only son Jesus to die on the Cross to save humanity? This is not a myth. No one can say that this sacrificial love in living is not an answer if tried honestly—God's way. But we all have the weeds in our hearts, the human nature, that is. I am mean and unkind, and lacking in understanding; pigheaded. This is not easy to eradicate but I love my country and my people, and what is the purpose of dwelling on past history and so prolonging bitterness? Let that kind of feeling go to hell where it belongs.

As people say, the wheels of time turn. Harold Blair was invited to America. His wife and some of our choir saw him off at Essendon airport. I wept as I saw that great plane going up into nowhere and was afraid for him. We were fond of him. His wife was standing there. She laughed at me and said, 'Goodness, it should be me crying, not you.'

Meanwhile the Aboriginal people were continuing to go to Pastor Nicholls' Church in Gore Street, Fitzroy, and have times of singing the old tunes and learning new ones. White people were invited as well, and a white woman and a dark woman took it in turns to play the organ.

When Harold arrived back from America he seemed different, happier somehow. He rang me up one day and asked me whether I would like to go to America and that I was invited to be part of a delegation to the Moral Re-Armament Training Centre on Mackinac Island, Michigan. I just couldn't believe it and said, 'What on earth for, and for how long?'

'About as long or short as you feel you wish to stay,' he replied.

I thought it was too good to be true. I thought every thought possible. I felt I was ignorant, uneducated, a good-time person, and I was in my fifties. I felt I should settle down. Besides, I suffer from claustrophobia and couldn't fly shut up in an aeroplane way up in space. I had to make up my mind and had only ten days to do so. It meant leaving my family and my country. Such mixed feelings. But what about seeing America and travelling? These ambitious thoughts won. With misgiving and apprehension about what was to come, I decided to go.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE MORNING I LEFT I did not have time to think, trying to get a taxi to take me to the aerodrome. It almost looked as though I would not make it. Everyone in the family was running round looking or telephoning for a taxi, until a gentleman who was leaving for work said he would take me. I was very grateful. I do not know who he was. At the airport I was too overwhelmed to shed tears. My brother-in-law and my sister, Selwyn and Geraldine Briggs and their family arrived there too late to say goodbye. But it was heart-warming to hear later that they had been there.

When I got into the aeroplane and saw the airtight windows and heard the door close, I would not look round, but gazed hard out the windows and wished there was air coming through them. There were seven in the

My daughter Mollie as a bride.

I love this picture of me and my great grandson.

Queen Salote, centre, with me on her left and other members of the Australian and New Zealand delegation to Tonga in 1964.

delegation: a couple from Newcastle and a young Aboriginal from Perth; from Melbourne a businessman called Mr Allchin, Mr Jim Ramsay, later a member of Parliament, and a young nurse, Lorna White. All my fears about air travel were at an end when Lorna turned on the airvent over my head. I marvelled at the comfort of the plane and the care of the hostesses.

We changed into a Qantas plane in Sydney for my first flight over the ocean. Well I cannot describe it all—the sea, the clouds—what a long way down it was to fall; but I believed God had a mission for me, and I was comforted a little. My faith was not always strong—it was mostly in myself, and I wondered at times why God really did bother!

Fiji was a place I had read about, but I did not think I would ever see it. I was very anxious to find out about the country and the Fijians. They looked shy and a bit proud. However, our stay was short. We boarded the plane again. It was night now. Everyone was made comfortable as the next hop was a long one. A few had extra seats and could stretch out. I had the three seats near the window. The hostess asked me if I would like to lie down and gave me cushions. But I sat up and looked out of the windows. It was all so exciting and I wasn't a bit sleepy. I just sat watching the stars and the clouds. Later on someone told me we were just two hours out, when I saw one of the propellors stop turning and heard a loud crack like lightning before a thunderstorm. I am sure I must have gone white with fright.

My first thought was 'Please Lord, save us.' My instinct was to awaken Lorna and the others. Then I thought I'd let them sleep because the captain and the crew would surely know what to do. It was only a matter of moments when word came over the loud speaker saying we were turning back to Nandi, Fiji. We landed

safely. Next day we boarded the plane again with a little misgiving, but I felt the officers and crew knew what they were doing. But my confidence was short-lived. The same thing happened again: on the other side of the plane a propellor stopped. By this time I had heard that the plane could fly with only two engines if the other two stopped.

At the expense of Qantas, we had to stay forty hours until the plane was able to fly again. So there were tours and sightseeing. We had a delightful visit to a Fijian village where the children sang for us. We saw the home of a Chief and had an interesting time there.

It was good to stretch our legs at Canton Island, where we stopped to refuel. The island is only seven miles wide and I thought the plane was going to land in the sea when it descended. I had never experienced such heat as when we were walking to the little building for a cool drink. I was glad to get back into the plane, which I was now very much attached to and when we reached Honolulu, where we left the plane, it was with a feeling of regret, just like leaving an old friend. When we reached the last step of the gangway, the air hostess put a Hawaian lei round my neck, beautiful fresh flowers, frangipani I think they were. It took me all my time to keep my eye on where to go, there was so much to look at. There were a lot of people at the airport. I was very interested in the women, who wore long dresses called *mu-mus* and some of them looked pretty depending on whether they were slim or not.

We went to a hotel on Waikiki Beach near Diamond Head. The ocean looked bluer than any sea I had seen. There were lots of watermelons, with flesh redder than I had seen before. We had a beautiful bedroom suite, where we rested for a time before boarding the plane for the United States of America. Honolulu was glamorous, the

Hawaians a mixed race and very interesting. What had I done to deserve this wonderful trip?

In San Francisco we had a three-hour stopover and friends met our party and took us in their cars round their beautiful city. Not far out from the airport we passed an avenue of gum trees. That made me feel homesick. We were told that they had been planted in memory of Australians who had fought in the last war. We drove across the Golden Gate Bridge and saw Alcatraz Prison in the distance. We were taken to the home of one of the drivers of our cars, and then back to the airport, our next stop Chicago. I saw a few Negroes there, who looked uninterested in seeing another coloured sister from somewhere else. I guess they see plenty of dark people.

Words cannot describe my feelings when we reached our destination at Mackinac Island. I had not experienced anything like this in my life. There were hundreds of people, many different colours and nationalities, and many in their beautiful national costumes. I was told that there were at least sixty different nationalities, many of them youth leaders, some leaders in their own countries. It all made me feel I wanted to shrink up and sneak away. I did feel inferior. I didn't have a national costume of any distinction. My people had worn kangaroo or possum skins to keep them warm and decorations of emu feathers. I was just an unknown Australian Aborigine. I was introduced to this one and that one. They were all gracious, but I shrank farther back into my shell and didn't want to come out.

The building where we met was constructed in the natural timber of those parts to represent a monstrous Red Indian tepee or wigwam, the sloping roofs supported by the timber. The Island had once been the territory of the American Indians and an old Chief many

moons ago had foretold how people would come there from all parts of the world and meet together in a huge tepee or wigwam to meet the Great Spirit of all people, and find peace with each other. This was now happening before my eyes.

At my first meal I was invited to the high table in the main dining room. There were three huge dining rooms I discovered later. I was led to a long, beautifully laid table. Although an Aborigine, I had eaten at high-class restaurants and at receptions in hotels, but there was something beautiful about the atmosphere here. The flowers were perfect, and the silver and cutlery were second to none.

A feeling of pride came over me. I thought to myself, 'I'll show them that an Australian Aborigine has dignity and knows how to eat and conduct herself.' I was seated between two friendly gentlemen and I began to feel at ease, until the one on the left was introduced as Commander So-and-So. The gentleman on my right I discovered was Lord So-and-So. The gentleman across the table was jet black with a beautiful robe, a charming character. He was a prince from one of the African countries. I was introduced to them by my tribal name, Lilardia, given me by that old Aboriginal warrior, Uncle Bill Cooper. When I discovered who these gentlemen were, I went dumb, and I felt I didn't know what this conference was all about.

Later on a party of Maoris arrived and I clung to them. Their humour and ways were a little like Aborigines'. But I realised I was not as educated as they were. These Maoris, who spoke in their own language to each other and wore their own native costumes, brought home to me that our culture and way of life were dying out fast, especially in Victoria and New South Wales. So many Aboriginal children do not know even one word of their

own tribal language. In the past we had thought it better to forget our traditions and culture and even as a child I do not remember seeing any of my people dressed in any tribal fashion, although I have seen drawings and paintings of them in the early days, done by Europeans. Then the Aborigines began to dress in government material or cast-off clothing. We were taught by the manager's wife to cut out dresses and to mend, which we quickly learned. But my tribal people I believe were not ashamed of their nakedness, only in winter wearing kangaroo, wallaby and possum skins for warmth.

As I sat at the conference and listened to people speaking from the platform I began to realise that they felt just as much need as I. Great men and women from nations I did not know existed, in their striking costumes—tall, well-built Arabs in flowing white and imposing head gear—all wanted to find the answer to their own needs and their countries' needs, answers to hate, bitterness and greed. I felt inadequate, mixing with them. I listened to people giving all they had materially and spiritually to undo evil, to right wrongs, to live a new way of life.

I roomed with Lorna White, the Australian nursing sister who had travelled over with me, but I spent most of the time with the happy group of Maoris, whose *hakas* and *poi* dances everyone enjoyed. Sometimes I felt a twinge of jealousy when I thought of the many stories from Australia about the old hunting days of Aboriginal life, which the people at the conference would have enjoyed. But I knew I had a lot to learn, so I attended lectures and meetings, where I heard people tell of happenings during the war years. I heard Madame Irene Laure, who was head of a French socialist women's organisation, and who had been a member of parliament in France, tell how she had hated the Germans with all

her heart. They had tortured her son to make him tell secrets of the Resistance Movement. She told how she could not bear to be in the same room as a German. Once, in Germany, when a group of Germans were on the platform, she had walked out of an Assembly. But she had been challenged by Dr Frank Buchman, who asked her how she could build a new world without the Germans—how could this be done if one nation was left out.

She had rushed to her room and started to pack her belongings to leave, hot with anger, tears streaming down her face. She stayed several days alone in her room, thinking over the past and what she had heard and seen. Then this woman, who was more than a Resistance fighter, came into the hall where Germans were speaking, went onto the platform and shook hands with each one. With tears, she apologised to them for the hate and bitterness in her heart. I heard that the late Chancellor Adenauer invited her to Germany. She told us she cried when she saw the German women working amongst the rubble of what had been houses, looking for lost possessions, pitifully picking up this and that. She went amongst them and talked about the feelings in her heart. She apologised over and over again as she spoke on platforms across Western Germany. Chancellor Adenauer said she was the best ambassador France had ever had. Madame Laure came to Australia a few years ago, and I hope she will come again and stay longer.

I could scarcely breathe, fearing for a Japanese officer as he spoke at the conference. There were many Japanese sitting on the platform that morning. He told that vast audience, many of them American, and some of them in uniform, how during the last war a young American airman whose plane was shot down had been brought to him. He told of his cruelty—and haltingly said he did

not know whether the American died—he hadn't cared. He had been mixed up in many shady deals after the war as he had had access to Red Cross funds. It must have cost him a lot to lay bare his soul. I can still see and remember every detail of that young fellow's courage as he finished by asking forgiveness of all those nations present in the huge audience. He said he wished to give the rest of his life to undo what he had done by fighting for world brotherhood and world peace. When he sat down you could have heard a pin drop. I felt he was so courageous, I cried and shook. And then, that whole gathering stood up and honoured him. It upset my whole world. I had thought many of the audience would be mad and hiss him. Then while they still stood, an American airman strode up to the platform. He acknowledged the wrong way he and other Americans had lived in Japan during the Occupation, some leaving children behind them.

Mackinac was truly a heavenly place. It was autumn and the golden and red autumn leaves against the blue of the lake made a picture never to be forgotten. No cars were allowed on this island, only horse-drawn carriages, or in winter sleighs drawn by horses through the snow.

But after three weeks of being there I got homesick and was determined to return to Australia. I was restless and felt subconsciously that I was a fraud. I could not run away from that feeling. Everyone was wonderfully kind as they got to know me. Some were straight with me. I was especially fond of one young Australian called Peter, who told me my bag was stuffed with unnecessary papers and goods. Dr Christopher Lancaster and his wife Lilian from Australia were there too. I have been in their home many times since, and when their children were small they would ask our Aboriginal children out to stay for the weekend.

Now I was homesick and felt I wanted to go walkabout

across that lake and ocean! My friend Lorna said, 'Come down under the trees overlooking the lake. We can sit on the comfortable chairs there and think quietly and ask for God's guidance.'

'All right,' I said, 'but I know what I want to do and that is go back home to my people and family. They need me I am sure.'

I did not say I was getting letters from home saying they were all right. My daughter Mollie was working, and Auntie Sarah Cooper, the widow of Uncle Bill Cooper, was caring for the household, and our neighbour Mrs Murphy was looking after the baby. I sat under that lovely shady tree looking over the Great Lakes. Although I said I wanted to go home, I did not know why. I did not feel lonely, as there were plenty of young and older Australians there. This was a heavenly, interesting place. I heard Lorna's quiet voice coming into my thinking, 'Let us ask for guidance; God will tell us what to do.' I thought of course He'll tell me to go home; I am sure he wants only good and educated people here. For the first time I listened to God. I began to realise what Moral Re-Armament meant. I decided to stay. I realised how selfish I was. I had not cared about the rest of the world, or about humanity. I had not been giving the right training to my family, only the mushy love that drew them all to me. I loved doing things my own way, not God's way. In a flash I saw the true picture of myself. I knew I could never be perfect. I was proud, and proud of my Aboriginal race, but what was I doing to help them or anyone else?

I heard Lorna's voice saying, 'What did God say to you?'

I said 'Stay long enough.' I stayed eight months.

When I think back it truly was a deeply satisfying time. I found out that things I had been ashamed of in my life

could be used to help other people. For the first time I allowed my hair to grow white instead of hiding it with dye. I felt awful with shame when some girls in the 'tidy' room said, 'Oh, your hair is going red in parts.' I had always kept my hair very black—out of the bottle—whenever I saw a few streaks of grey showing. So I answered offhandedly, 'Oh yes, a lot of our people have red hair, light hair and so on.' It was a silly lie, and afterwards I said quite openly what I had done. I was quite amazed that I began to like the grey that was coming back into my hair.

I began to realise that Moral Re-Armament was an old truth, true Christianity in action, starting with oneself. It was indeed a challenge, an ideology. Sometimes I got fidgety when I could not understand or grasp new ideas. I was glad to be able to ask the Australians with us. I met Mr Kim Beazley, an Australian member of parliament, the day he was returning to Australia. I felt homesick again. But I was learning that how I lived and what I gave of what I was learning was important. I feel now I could have given so much more. America gave me so much.

I was invited to take part in an African play called *The Last Phase,* which depicted the story of a country in Africa and the moral qualities needed to make the country work. I still looked like an Aboriginal even in the African costume and headgear. I had two words to say. It was thrilling because I got to learn what it was all about. There were other coloured people who were not African besides myself in the play. I can remember a pretty Indian girl of fourteen. Her mother was a member of parliament in New Delhi. She came to me one day with a solemn face and said, 'Mrs Tucker, I wish to apologise to you.'

I said, 'What on earth for?'

She told me that when she saw me in the African costume she laughed and thought I looked funny. I told her I laughed too when I saw myself in the mirror. I felt I didn't look much like an African either, but every African in that play helped me and I soon caught on.

I took part in another play while I was in America, in Atlanta, Georgia. It was *The Crowning Experience* and it is the true story of the life of a Negro woman, Mary McLeod Bethune. She was the child of slave parents, and the youngest of a family of sixteen. She was fortunate in having been educated. She started a school herself built from material found on a rubbish dump. They made pencils for the little Negro children from charred wood.

The Crowning Experience was later filmed in America. I have watched it fifteen or twenty times on screens across Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga. It is a play of such reality that it shocks you out of the comfortable feeling that you are a good person with nothing to worry about. It reaches the depths of your feelings and takes you from misery through to laughter and fun.

It had never entered my head until I saw *The Crowning Experience* that a black woman's human nature was the same as a white or yellow-skinned one, and that it could change! How small our thinking becomes when we let colour, nationality or human position divide us. All that matters is that we get to the root of those things that lead to a down-grade in character.

Mary McLeod Bethune's education built character. It made her a whole person. It used her heart as well as her brain. It made her want to sacrifice and to right wrongs, especially those she herself had caused. This play made me see the many wrong and silly things I had done in my life. I began to see this way of life as a means

of true living and giving, for young and old.

I left America after eight months, encouraged by the words of Dr Frank Buchman: 'The destiny of the Australian Aborigine is so to live that he recalls the white man to his faith. You and your people will be the re-makers of the world.'

As I set out for Manila on the first stage of the return flight to Australia, I thought, 'What did I give to humanity?' I had had moments and even days of tantrums in America, and had often wanted to go home. But my friends had been very patient with me, and I knew I couldn't escape from my own nature. I feared to think what might lie ahead, but it came to me that even an unknown Aborigine can give precious gold for her people and all people who are hungry for knowledge.

I have in common with all Aboriginal people a belief that there is a Supreme Being, who, deep in our hearts, we have an awe and respect for. When I was a child I listened to our elders who told us children how wrongdoers were punished. It was punishment as severe as one reads about in the Bible. Laugh as we might about such tales as Noah's flood, or the threat of hell fire, can we say our world today is a sane, happy and contented place? When people ask me as they sometimes do, 'Why did the Aborigines take to the white man's religion?' I tell them that the Supreme Being belongs to all races and reaches into all hearts. It is a power that rests in the inner being that makes you feel you are a person and makes you long to fight for something better in the world now and for the sake of generations to come.

I found at Mackinac Island that whether you have wealth or whether you are penniless, you can try to live absolutely, wholly. It was summed up for me in Christ's Sermon on the Mount: absolute honesty, absolute purity of motive, unselfishness and love for all races. Is it too

big a challenge to find direction from this great Spirit, peace with God and each other?

On the flight to Manila everyone in the plane was like one happy family. We touched down at Guam and got out to stretch our legs. We gathered shells, which I put in my handkerchief and tied up. We had just become airborne again when I noticed my handkerchief moving. I gave a shriek. Yes, one shell was occupied!

In Manila I stayed at a hotel facing the sea. It was Easter. I could see the war damage: sunken ships and bombed areas. I heard of the cruelties and tortures and the hate and bitterness left from those terrible days of war. On a clear day one could see Corregidor, where the Americans and others had given their lives.

I met Captain Agerico Palaypay, who had been aide-de-camp to President Magsaysay until the President was killed in an air crash. I was treated like a queen, but felt humbled when I was asked with others to lay a wreath on the tomb of President Magsaysay.

Rajmohan Gandhi, a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, was chairman of a discussion on television. Many nationalities representing their countries at the conference took part. When I was asked to speak, a short time before we went on the air, I was terrified. My mind went blank. I prayed hard and asked God to tell me what to say. I looked around and saw everyone in that room doing the same. So I forgot myself and prayed for them. A miracle happened—I lost my fear and gave with joy what God put into my heart.

The conference was in Baguio in the mountains. There I witnessed Filipinos telling of their hatred for the Japanese, tears running down the cheeks of both Japanese and Filipinos. I cried with joy to see that God can obliterate hate in the heart of man, no matter what nationality.

After ten days we boarded the plane for Darwin. When I saw the shores of my homeland through the window of the plane my heart melted. I cried and thanked God for giving me another chance to work in a new way, to bring understanding between all peoples.

I had learned that hate and violence does more harm to the hater than to the hated, because it makes you ineffective in dealing with the cause of hate. Hatred can be cured, I know, because it has happened to me.

Our people's needs in Australia are many: land, health, education, housing. So are the needs of some white people. Together if we wish to see it, we can have a world where everyone has food and a home, where a person's character matters more than his colour. Race is a fact of life. We were born different colours. I am black. It is not the real issue. I believe we Australian Aborigines could lead the way in working together.

We had lunch in Darwin and boarded the plane for Melbourne, stopping for a night in Sydney, where I was overwhelmed by the number of dark and white friends I met during such a brief stay.

The folks back home were so dear to me that I never thought I could live without being near them—yet I had been away for eight months. At Essendon I saw black, and white painted black, welcoming me home, doing a corrobboree. In my excitement I could not at first recognise all my grandchildren. My daughter was there with the whole of the clan, and it was a great joy to see them.

There was a welcome to those of us returning at 'Armagh', the Moral Re-Armament home in Melbourne. It was the most beautiful home I had seen in Australia. I hadn't known of it before. I realised there that I was a person and could give to humanity, my country and the world, by the way I lived. I was treated as a guest of

honour. For the first time I spoke without fear.

My mother went to this home and I remember her saying that Moral Re-Armament was like a big stone, going round the world killing all evil. The hosts who welcomed us were Colonel the Hon. Malise Hore-Ruthven and his wife the Hon. Angela Hore-Ruthven and their family. Colonel Hore-Ruthven was a brother of Lord Gowrie, a former Governor-General of Australia.

My daughter Mollie invited the Hore-Ruthvens to a meal in her three-bedroom Housing Commission home at Broadmeadows. I advised against this, thinking of the beautiful silver and dinner sets they were accustomed to. Mollie said, 'they have asked us to a meal, and have had the kiddies stay for weekends. They make us feel like royalty. We'll manage.'

She did, with china and cutlery borrowed from the neighbours, who were just as thrilled as we were that the invitation had been accepted. They all came, including the children, Nancy and Sally and James. My mother and old Aunt Sarah Cooper and myself were there as well and all the steps-and-stairs kids, a few adopted ones, as well as our own.

In 1975 I received a letter from Nancy that brought back memories of that visit. It said: 'I have one wonderful memory of your mother, Marg. We went to Molly's home, as you describe, for a meal. Your mother was there. She was sitting in a straight-backed chair surrounded by children, dogs, noise and general family bric-a-brac. When we came in we went up to her and she said, "Welcome to my home and my land." She said it with such power and simplicity ... She *was* a queen sitting there on her chair, and no one in Australia had even said, "Welcome to my country" to us before. It made a deep impression on me.'

Tom and Florence Uren, a Melbourne couple, took an

Aboriginal family into their home, a family of five with another on the way. The father, like a lot of dads, enjoyed his fire-water and sometimes came home the worse for wear. He was given a straight talk and was told how he was letting down his family. But they kept on caring and looking after him. When he gave away the drink, his mates at work scoffed at him and said how weak he was. But he grinned as he drank his lemonade and said, 'lions and tigers are strong and they only drink water.' When his wife was taken to hospital to have their sixth child, Tom and Florence were there too.

People like Tom and Florence Uren, Jim and Tui Beggs—he is President of the Melbourne Waterside Workers Federation—and many more have shown me in how they lived the truth of those words of Jesus, 'God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

I have learned to speak out against wrong policies, and to put right what I have done wrong, no matter what the consequences. Thank God I can always start again. I have friends, black and white, who understand and encourage me to keep on. I can never be perfect, but one gets results from aiming to live straight through the wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount. I still have my moments of frustration but I think back and am thankful to have been given the right to learn the art of seeing straight. Everyone has that right, poor or rich, simple or great.

I was asked to serve on the Aborigines Welfare Board. I felt honoured and humbled. Pastor Nicholls, now Sir Douglas Nicholls, and Harold Blair had been on the Board, but I was the first Aboriginal woman to be appointed. I was quite dumb for the first couple of months, but the chairman and other members were

helpful. I was often asked to unravel some of the difficulties that arose in the various places where Aborigines lived in Victoria. I was very happy on that Welfare Board. There were genuine men on it, and I was sorry to see it break up. It gave care to each Aboriginal family, and discipline too, when this was needed.

Mr Reginald Worthy was the Director of the new Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs set up by the Victorian Government. This was very different from the Board and I had to learn all over again and must have made myself a nuisance by asking too many questions. I often got carried away from the right course. I feel as I look back I could have been more helpful, and am sorry for those lost opportunities.

But the years must bring changes. Most Aborigines in the new Advisory Council to the Ministry wanted higher learning, equal opportunities, and rights. Mr Worthy had the gigantic task of directing a new policy for the Aborigines. I remember some great things he did. I am grateful for the years I had on the Council. Changes take getting used to, but I learned a lot. We Aborigines are learning and progressing. We have great opportunities now, but we need to be equipped to make the best use of them. This is very clear to me although I am not brainy. Before I became a member of the Aborigines Welfare Board I had a trip to New Zealand, visiting the cities and meeting many Maoris, including Major Harawira and his wife. He had been Chaplain to a Maori battalion. Mrs Wiki Bennett MBE was another one I met, and Guide Rangi. I stayed in their homes and spoke in schools. They felt a training in Moral Re-Armament was the equipment needed for their people and all peoples.

A wonderful experience was going to Tonga with Miss Sylvia Cust, an Australian, and a group of New Zealanders, both whites and Maoris. We were invited by

the late great Queen Salote, who had seen the film, *The Crowning Experience* while she was in Auckland. She wanted her people to see it and we took it with us. The Queen and her son Prince Tungi (as he was then) housed us in the guest-house and gave us helpers to look after us. We were invited to her palace for morning tea and had our photographs taken with her. We made friends with the turtle Captain Cook had given to her grandfather or great-grandfather. I heard later that the turtle died a few weeks after the Queen's death.

At the church service at Easter, the singing was something I shall never forget. The Queen herself took part in the service.

The Crowning Experience was shown several times, including shows for the school and college students. We went to many homes and were showered with hospitality, especially at their feasts. They generously pressed many gifts on us. We begged them not to and said we would have to get a ship to carry them all back!

One morning the Queen came to see us in the home she had lent. She had tea with us and was most gracious. We showed her another film, *Men of Brazil* while she was with us. At that time I remember Her Majesty saying 'We haven't much money, but we do have God!'

A great crowd came to see us off at the airport some miles out of the city. The matron of the hospital was there and the Tongan women farewelled us with songs and dances. The three-hour flight to Suva was rough going, with storms and rain. It frightened the devil out of me and I prayed to God to help us. The prayers were answered and we were able to land, although the pilot had feared he might have to divert the plane, which was a small one. We showed *The Crowning Experience* that night and had supper at the Fijian Mayor's home. Later on we visited schools and both Fijian and Indian homes.

They did everything to make us welcome.

On my first visit to Brisbane I stayed with the Groves family in Mitchelton. Mrs Groves' father had a holiday home at Buderim, which he offered to Colonel and Mrs Hore-Ruthven and their family for a holiday. They asked me to go with them. I loved that family because they were so sincere and happy and shared their joys and mistakes with everyone. They made me feel I was leading the way in everything that happened.

At Buderim I begged them to let me do the washing, feeling happy that here was something I could do well and was sure of. I had not been long at the wash-tub before Mrs Hore-Ruthven was asking me to let her help! I grudgingly let her hang out the clothes after I had carried the basket out. I was somewhat outraged when one of the party came into the laundry with a soft brush and showed me how to clean the collars!

I went to get the clothes off the line when they were dry. I laughed at the way the shirts and other articles were hung. It was so comical. I thought 'everyone to his station.' The story brought much merriment to the dinner table when I apologised for being a know-all. Mrs Hore-Ruthven laughed the most.

On another day, we had lunch and spent an afternoon with Sir Raphael and Lady Cilento and their grandchildren. We all went for a walk along the beach and paddled in the water. Then we went back to the house. I played my ukelele and sang to the grandchildren until my throat was dry. Those children hugged and kissed me as I left. I was embarrassed, thinking their mother would not like it, but she thanked me too for the singing.

I found out that Sir Raphael knew the famous Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira, who was in trouble at that time because of sharing his drinks with his people. My heart aches when I think of him now. I wrote a letter

to Albert and gave it to Sir Raphael to see it was delivered to him. I was very glad to have word later that he did receive it. I am grateful for having met Albert, a tremendous personality. He was a good man, and I thank God for what he gave to humanity, black and white. I feel a glow of pride to be of the same race.

One day Colonel Hore-Ruthven and the family drove about fifty miles out of Brisbane to visit their old friends, the Bell sisters, who lived in an old homestead almost one hundred years old. Various visiting Royalties had stayed there including the Prince of Wales and the Queen Mother. I was unaware of all this when they asked me to go with them for the drive, and said there was nothing I would enjoy more. When we were nearing the homestead, they told me about the friends they were going to see. I got into a turmoil—I was so worried for them, taking an Aborigine on such a visit. I thought what are these people going to think? I had only been in such places as a maid before. I told them my feelings and we stopped the car while we thought and talked about it. I thought that if this family were happy to take me on this visit I should trust them, and I prayed for courage.

When we arrived one of these ladies was waiting to greet the Colonel and his family. As she led the way, I hung back and pride reared its head like a snake. But this lady, the younger Bell sister, stopped and waited for me and talked as we walked into the beautiful old homestead. It was very hot, and luncheon was laid out on a table on the verandah, which was shaded by bushy shrubs and tall trees. The younger sister took a piece of bread and threw it up into the air. In no time the butcher birds were snapping up the bits of bread—even before the bread touched the ground.

I wondered to myself which part of the house the kitchen was in, and thought I would probably be eating

there. Then the older Miss Bell, who was sitting at the top end of the table, pointed out where we were to sit. She looked at me and said, 'Lilardia, will you sit here?' pointing to the chair on her right. I got such a shock and felt so ashamed I could have cried.

After lunch the younger sister took me into the beautiful garden and showed me the different trees that had been planted by their royal guests. Then this great-hearted woman took me for a little walk away from the house and showed me two graves fenced in neatly, with some shrubs growing inside. She told me they were the two Aboriginal women who had loved her mother and always been with her, and who their mother loved. After that I lost all my pride. I got my ukelele out of the car and sat on the garden seat and sang songs. It was a great, friendly and heart-melting time with these old pioneers, the Bell sisters.

Later as we were going home I told the Colonel and Mrs Hore-Ruthven and the family that I had thought I would have to eat in the kitchen on my own. Straightaway Mrs Hore-Ruthven said gaily, 'I would have gone into the kitchen and had my meal there too.'

When the Hore-Ruthvens were asked to speak at the Sunday afternoon Forum at Wesley Church, Melbourne, they had me speak as well. The Rev. Dr Sir Irving Benson was in charge of the Church then. He wrote a heartfelt letter to me when my mother died.

My first visit to Canberra was in the thirties. We travelled by bus hired for the occasion. We were mostly from our Aboriginal choir, and the majority were women, but there was a sprinkling of men. We had been offered quarters in a boys' college, it being school holidays.

Mr Shadrach James, the son of our old school master at Cummeragunga, Mr Thomas James, was leader of the delegation. He presented us to several members of

parliament, with whom we had an interesting time, although I do not think they took us seriously. I remember one calling me 'Princess' which made me feel I should act like one, for after all did we not come from the original people of this continent, and on both sides of my family there were chiefs of tribes.

Mr James spoke out well, and we, I remember, were promised jobs and social benefits, but looking back, the promises didn't come to anything much. We returned to our homes with high expectation, feeling that we had attempted something. During the time in Canberra, we were invited to sing over the radio for the first time. There was no television in those days. Our tracking instincts were hopelessly confused in that beautiful city, and we saw little of it then, but I have since attended many conferences there.

One which stands out in my memory was for Moral Re-Armament in the 1960s. I loved every minute of that conference, meeting here in my own country, a great many different nationalities, Maoris, white New Zealanders, Indians and people from the Philippines. We were looked after and cared for each other. During the conference there were breaks for such things as sightseeing, picnics, going to Parliament House, and visiting the embassies. One day I was taken for a picnic to Black Mountain. I was truly excited as it took me back to one of the stories related by Mother round the camp fire or in our little humpy, when we would beg her to tell us of what we called 'olden times'.

In 1975 I spoke at the final session of the Women and Politics Conference, also held in Canberra. This is what I said:

'What have we achieved? Ambition, hate, division, our country suffering as a result. We are fast losing to selfishness and degradation, all that we hold dear. Why?

'Because we have lost the God given courage of yesterday. We detour round all the positive roads.

'Education is valuable, but are we putting our education and gifts to a positive use, which will benefit mankind the world over? To fight for one minority is good, but it is far better to fight that all peoples receive equality of opportunity.

'There are wars and rumours of wars, but what about the war against evil? That can be led by anyone who has the Holy Spirit within. What do we fear? Mostly what people will think of us if we stand for what is right. We forget that there is a shield, an armour that protects those who fight for right against evil. The simplest human being can live this way, also the rich and mighty.

'Is there any other way to heal our sick country and the world? Try it, not for a week, or for a month, or for a year, but always. There is only one right way and one wrong way, our hearts will tell us.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Call it what you like, but deep in my heart I do believe in the Holy Spirit—the Good Spirit, the Wonderful Spirit that has neither hate, bitterness, class or creed. Everyone has it in their heart deep down, if we only skim all the scum off, get rid of these feelings of bitterness and hate, the feeling of lost hope such as I have been having the last few years.

As I write this it is our National Aboriginal Day. And what are we Aborigines making of this day? A few say it is a day of mourning. Some make it a day to voice political action, which is the trend of the last few years. This has had to come. When you come to think of it, it has been there all the time right through the years. Human nature! I remember the words I heard on Mackinac Island: 'If everybody cared enough and

everybody shared enough there would be enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed.' And the home truth that has helped me most: 'It is not the colour of one's skin that matters. it is character'.

I had always said, especially when I had been trying to get a point across to a white person, 'Oh, you want to think like an Aborigine if you want to help our people.' Then one day it hit me. Heaven forbid! Our people, the Aborigines, are people, not separate specimens. We are humans and have the same human nature, and like the same things, the same as any other race. There is a mighty way we can all, no matter what our colour, fight with courage and sincerity in our hearts to put right what is wrong in our countries, starting with ourselves.

I have to start with myself lots of times. I am always saying in despair when I know my thinking is going all haywire, 'Oh God, I want to tear so-and-so to pieces. He is hurting my people, the Aborigines. There are only a few left. Our land has been taken, our hunting grounds, even our right to think for ourselves.' Some of us are afraid to open our mouths, and others who do are 'radicals'!

I sometimes feel so miserable that I cannot even shed a tear. I do pray from my heart when I think of Jesus Christ and what He gave thousands of years ago to save people from being destroyed by evil in all its forms. Our wise old Aboriginal people long ago recognised Him as the son of the Good Spirit.

As an Aborigine, thinking not only of my people that are gone but of the pioneers and yes, the white convicts too, my heart aches for the struggles and hardships and cruelties caused by greed and ambition. My feelings on this National Aboriginal Day are that we need to put aside our grievances and think positively how to put right what is wrong in Australia today, to forgive past

mistakes and to create a leadership that can help our country help the world. Australia can be a pattern for the whole world in the way we live, especially in bridging the gap between black and white. We can do it together. Think bigger from our hearts. Young Aborigines have taught me a lot. They have great courage and can give to our country in many ways.

Many changes have come to pass through the years I have lived. The finding of Aboriginal relics all over Australia in recent years with no doubt more to come, prove that forty thousand years ago our people were not the least advanced after all! I, and many of our dark Australians too, are very happy with these discoveries, and I am grateful to know from the findings of the tribal graves and fossils what happened in this God given country of ours, thousands of years ago.

But it was with mixed feelings that I read about these finds. Some of our Aboriginal people made a fuss about the bones being disturbed. We on the Advisory Council of the Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs were shown a film about the diggings. Actually I felt a great awe in watching that film shown in colour and explained in detail by the Curator of the Museum. I have a great respect and liking for him, although I didn't agree with everything he said. I guess he was doing his job. He had his heart in it, but he wasn't thinking of what the majority of the Aborigines felt, especially the older ones.

My old uncles, Osley and Billy Ingram had told us where our tribal burial grounds were, but we were never to reveal the spot. I have no idea now just where the site was. I can remember Uncle Billy threatening a white man who was digging for skeletons round those parts and selling them to the museum. The white man got scared stiff at Uncle Billy's threats.

There are still stories of the beliefs and traditions of the

tribal days, although the tribes from all over Australia and the islands to the north are now intermarrying. Secrets of their folk-lore have been kept and sometimes buried with them. I think this is a pity, because these ancient things are priceless, and should be valued by the young Aborigines who are being educated today, often at universities.

When I am alone, such thoughts come crowding into my head and heart. A great white man once told us that we Aborigines could bring love and care and understanding to all people, and recall the white man to his faith. I am often conscious of talking too much and forgetting that it is great to be quiet and listen, not only with my ears, but with my heart also. In these quiet times, I often find the answer to great difficulties and am given courage to carry out my convictions. I am a coward. I cannot stand hurts to myself or anyone else. I like my own way a lot of the time, but I have learned to own up when I am wrong, and am uncomfortable until I make amends and say I am really sorry from my heart. I like to 'do the wild corrobboree' when I feel angry, but this anger diminishes when I try to understand and care for people. Hurts and anger and fears over happenings of the past can be used. We can learn from those mistakes. We may not forget, but in the way of the Good Spirit, we can forgive.

I have never ceased to wonder at the Good Spirit's guidance and judgment for me, a mixed-up bitter person. Explanation of muddled problems are put into my heart, all unravelled, clear and sound. I sometimes feel ashamed to write down all my feelings, laying my soul bare for everyone to know my hopes and fears from early childhood.

The lack of care and the lack of understanding of our people in those years from my childhood upwards—some called it paternalistic, but it was less than that.

There is still paternalism amongst our administrators. Please forgive me, but I write with a view to helping the thinking of those who are administrators.

A lot of years have been wasted, but with a new spirit, a new sense of purpose, a Stone Age people who have lost all could learn to live straight and give something to the whole of humanity. There is a right way and a wrong way to care for people. Every day I make mistakes and wonder why we Aborigines cannot get through to the thinking of governments and administrators. Then I realise it is because we have no clear-cut answers. Bitterness clouds our mission, and creates division. We need to fight for people's deepest needs, white or dark, or any race. We cannot really say we are free from ambition and self-seeking. Jealousy and corruption make us an easy prey for those who want to use us for wrong purposes, often splitting us into little groups working against each other.

I ponder over the memories passed on from my mother, memories from before the white explorers rowed down the Murray River. The Aborigines followed them for miles along the banks. I like to think that my mother's tribe influenced other tribes to let them go on their way peacefully. I do feel that our old Aborigines, once owners of this land of Australia, were ever so much wiser than we, their descendants. I love my people of today, but I often wonder if in another two hundred years our origin will have died out, a myth of the past, swallowed up through mixed marriages.

Evil is the same today as it was thousands of years ago, and the answer to it is the same. The truth is the same and a lie is the same. Both white and dark have come far from the Stone Age days. But what are modern parents giving to their children of the eternal values? Our old people understood only too well the old saying 'don't do

what I do, do what I say.' There are so many lost souls. But there is a cure—what Jesus Christ stood for and died for. What I need is the courage to live up to higher moral standards in a struggle I find hard when I follow my own thinking and go my own way. Then I become totally lost.

Aborigines are mostly peace-loving, although suspicious and usually on their guard. By nature we do like to meet others half way. All my life it has been a joy to achieve things: getting my sums right at school; or to give things: taking a pretty feather of the *nankeen* (crane) to a loved school teacher. But if I had to own up to a wrong, I would ponder over it for days. After a while it would get too much for my conscience and I would have to be honest. That was when I was a child. May was the same. I like to think that this was due to our early upbringing by the old Aboriginal people and the missionaries. I have tried to pitch in and help as far as I have been able. I try to fathom why one wants to be top dog. I suppose it is fear of losing prestige. I have gone through all these phases with their miserable feelings. One can become so selfish and cowardly. My biggest fear in life is doing the wrong thing, but I do know now how to put things right with my family, friends and other people.

It is amazing what is happening now compared with forty years ago. The Aboriginal Legal Aid too are doing fine work for lost, don't-know-what-to-do Aborigines and their families. But I cannot help thinking, although I have not had much education, that prevention is better than cure. A Man died on the Cross long ago giving up everything to show the way. I know people today who are trying to do the same. I try to keep out of things I don't know much about, but I do try to put right what is wrong as God shows me, and I hope to do that for the rest

of my life. In this I am guided always by the story Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls told in church one day about a black man who said, 'You can play a tune of sorts on the white keys of a piano; you can play some sort of tune on the black keys; but for perfect harmony, you must use both.' I got that point, it is a terrific one.