HANDING OUT CHANGE!

by

FRANK COONEY

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This story is dedicated to my wife, Joyce, without whom it certainly could never have been written.

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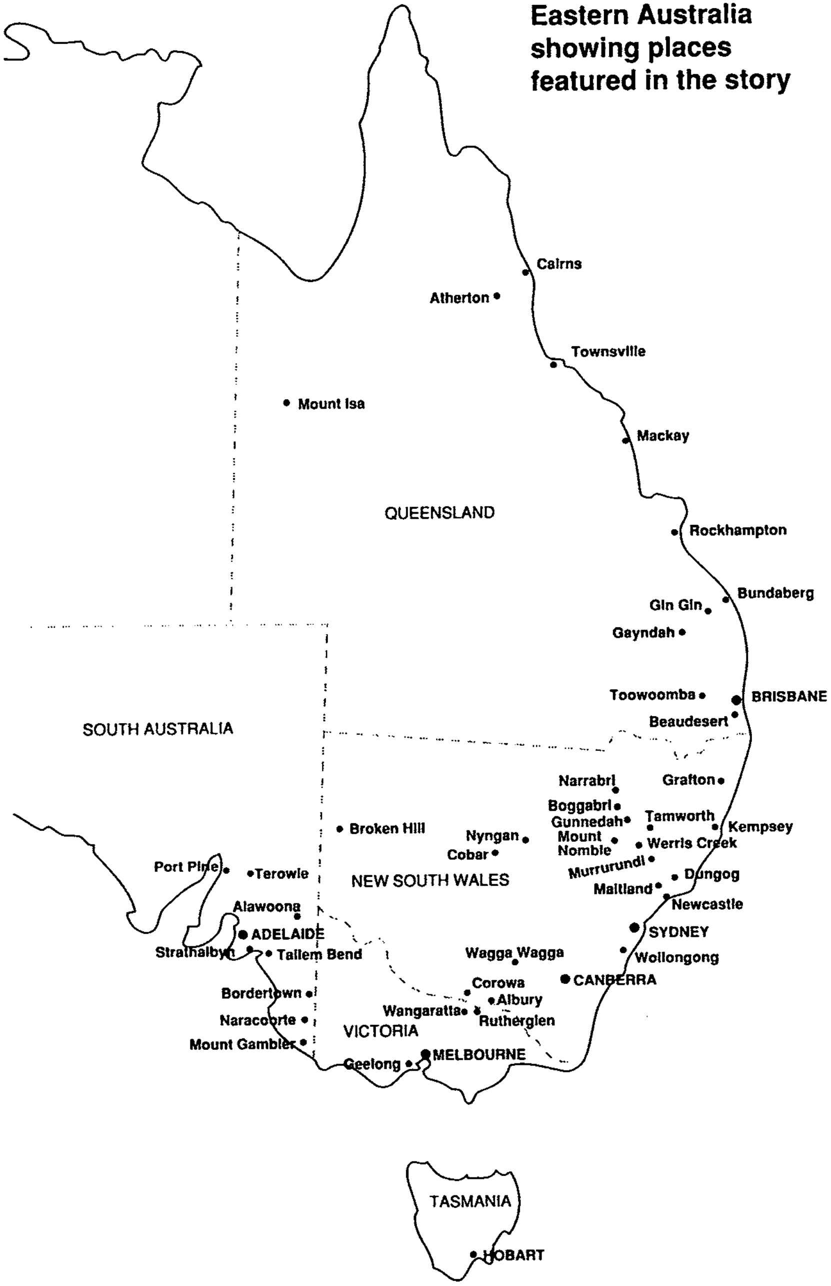


Eastern Australia showing places featured in the story

Cairns
Atherton
Townsville
Mount Isa
Mackay
QUEENSLAND
Rockhampton
Bundaberg
Gin Gin
Gayndah
Toowoomba
BRISBANE
Beaudesert
SOUTH AUSTRALIA
Narrabri
Grafton
Boggabri
Gunnedah
Tamworth
Kempsey
Broken Hill
Nyngan
Mount Nomble
Werris Creek
Cobar
Murrurundi
Port Pirie
Terowie
NEW SOUTH WALES
Dungog
Maitland
Newcastle
Alawoona
SYDNEY
ADELAIDE
Strathalbyn
Tailem Bend
Wagga Wagga
Wollongong
CANBERRA
Corowa
Bordertown
Albury
Wangaratta
Rutherglen
Naracoorte
VICTORIA
Mount Gambier
MELBOURNE
Geelong
TASMANIA
HOBART

FOREWORD

Frank Cooney arrived in Melbourne from England the day Backwood won the Melbourne Cup. That day, in 1924, was marked by controversy as thousands of race-goers protested about the new members' stand at Flemington race-course. They wanted a fair go for the ordinary bloke.

Much of Frank's life has been spent working for a fair go for the ordinary bloke. He knows what it is to be jobless. Like thousands of young men during the Great Depression, he carried his swag and jumped the rattlers all over Eastern Australia, searching for work. In later years, as a tram conductor in Melbourne, his concern for his fellow trammies and his industry took him into the union movement, and he became a Vice-President of the Victorian Tramways Union. He paints a picture of the movement in those days which I believe fair-minded people of both left and right will agree is true.

I first met Frank nearly forty years ago when I was a young wharfie. To me, in those days, the trammies were a Melbourne institution. Their personalities flowed right down the tram. They had a patter for everyone; for the blue-collar worker in the early hours of the morning, then the white-collar worker, the school kids, the housewives and the elderly. They set you up for the day. Frank was one of those trammies, plying his humour and good-will up and down the streets of Melbourne.

But his impact wasn't confined to trams and union meetings. From the Depression days when he earned a living as a vaudeville artist, he has loved the theatre; and has helped develop plays which have brought hope to many situations of conflict and despair. When the bitter strike at Mount Isa was at its height in 1965, Frank went there with a production which played to full houses and, many say, helped shape new attitudes on both sides of the dispute.

And through the book runs the story of life with his wife Joyce and their five sons. It is a stirring story, seen through the eyes of a man who, at one time, saw nothing ahead except homeless and hopeless drifting. His colourful description is full of common sense and honesty, humour and warmth.

Frank Cooney is an ordinary man who has done extraordinary things. When you read this book, I think you will understand why.

Jim Beggs
Waterside Workers Federation
President, Melbourne branch, 1971-92
National President, 1988-92

PROLOGUE

It was mid-afternoon on a pleasant autumn day, and I was lying on the floor of an empty railway truck at Werris Creek, a railway junction in the State of New South Wales. Beside me, enjoying a snooze in the warm air, was Dick, my travelling mate. The truck was part of a goods train about to pull out of the yards. I had found from the driver that it would be heading north-west through the New England district, an area of sheep, grain and cattle pastures.

The year was 1933, and Australia was experiencing the harsh, grinding realities of the Depression. I was twenty-two years old, and typical of thousands of men who were 'riding the rattler' up, down and across the country, in the vain hope of finding work.

As I waited for the jolt of the train buffers which would signal that we were on our way, two police helmets suddenly appeared above the side of the truck. 'Come on, you two,' one of the policemen barked, 'make it lively - and no playin' around.' Startled and confused, silently cursing at being caught, we hopped down from the truck, and were marched across the railway lines and over the railway bridge to the police station. There we were locked up.

To our surprise we were greeted in the cells by six other men. They told us they had been caught in the yards a couple of nights earlier. One of them, a big Irishman, sported a beautiful black eye. It turned out that the station master had rung the sergeant after midnight to say there were swagmen in the yard. Being dragged from his bed had done nothing to improve the sergeant's temper, and when Paddy refused to move, he got a whacking thump in the eye.

Constable Weismuller charged us with trespassing on railway property, and examined the contents of our grubby clothes and swags. He found some verse I occasionally jotted down in a notebook. 'H'm' he said, 'not bad, not bad at all'. Grateful for the compliment, I replied, 'I'm glad you think so, no one else seems to.'

He misinterpreted my remark to mean that he didn't comprehend poetry. 'Listen, clever Dick,' he threatened, 'you'll have that attitude knocked out of you before you leave this lock-up. What's your name?' 'John Masefield,' I replied. He didn't query it; so the name of the former British poet laureate appears in the records of the Werris Creek police station.

The following afternoon we were taken along to the court for the petty sessions. Shaved and clean for the first time in weeks, eight of us jammed into the space around the small defendant box, to the amusement of the crowd in the courtroom. The sergeant read out the charges and, to save spelling out tedious details, simply stated he had apprehended us all on the previous day.

'How do you plead, boys?' enquired the magistrate. 'Guilty,' we replied. 'Two pounds or four days imprisonment?' he asked, his smile indicating that he had no doubt what we would choose. 'Four days'. Later we were told that similar penalties had been passed on a hundred and fifty men between January and March of that year.

Back we went to the lockup. We had struck it lucky; the sergeant's wife, who was contracted by the Government to cook meals for prisoners, was a generous soul. Breakfast consisted of porridge, bacon and eggs. At mid-day we were usually given hot meat and vegetables, sometimes with sweets. In the evening we had a cold meal with bread and butter. This was a tremendous contrast to our usual diet of sandwich handouts and whatever scraps we could scrounge from hotels.

The sergeant tossed in a tin of tobacco and allowed us to keep the lights on till eleven at night if we wanted to play cards or yarn. But he made clear that he was tough on anyone who had a record of trouble. Four days later his parting shot was, 'Don't get caught again or else!'

We set off along the north-west road, picking up a pair of rabbits promised to us by the local rabbit man, and a pound of butter from the grocer. When we were well out of sight of the town, we turned back to the railway line and walked to the next siding. Late that evening a goods train stopped at the siding for a few minutes, and we jumped on.

The night was cold, the stars hard and bright in a black sky. We huddled in our blankets, grateful to be under the cover of a heavy truck tarpaulin. At one point the train braked sharply, and Dick stuck his head out to see where we were. Suddenly, 'Swoosh', he was saturated with a cascade of water which had gathered in the belly of the tarpaulin. As the train clanked and swayed along in the dark, we tried to help him dry out, and dug in our swags for something dry for him to wear.

What had brought me to a life of wandering up and down the country, begging for food, being kicked around by the authorities, jobless, homeless, resentful of a society which could not provide work for those willing and able?

1

THE BOY

I was born on March 9th 1912 at Ardwick, a suburb of the industrial city of Manchester in England. My father worked at any unskilled job he could find - road paver, storeman - to keep the home going. He was small, with jet black wavy hair, and a pair of smiling Irish eyes, inherited from an ancestry that went back about five hundred years in Ireland, then disappeared into France. He had a good tenor voice, which he used at concerts and in pubs, particularly in songs praising the Irish Self-Determination League. At that time the brutal ex-British soldiers, the Black and Tans, were wreaking havoc in Ireland, and Dad would never stand up when the British national anthem was played.

He did all the things considered good fun in that period - vaudeville shows, drinking with his mates in the pubs till closing time, billiards, cards and gambling. He was a soccer enthusiast, played fairly well, and barracked for Manchester City.

My mother I only vaguely remember. She suffered from tuberculosis, and eventually went to a TB sanatorium. One day when I was seven she unexpectedly turned up at home, and said to my grandmother, 'If I'm to die, I'll die here at home, not in that place.' I remember the night she died. It was a May evening and I was sitting on the landing at the top of the stairs, trying to hear what was going on in her room. I heard someone urging her in whispers to drink the grape juice they had squeezed for her. Mingled with the whispering was the heavy rasp of her breathing. My father came out of the room, discovered me there, and sent me off to the evening service at the local church. He met me on my way home and told me my mother had died. She was thirty-four. She is buried in Moston cemetery in Manchester.

We lived with my mother's mother, and she brought me up after my mother died. Grandmother Goodfellow was a thin, wiry Irishwoman from County Cavan. She had run away from home at the age of eighteen to marry the man she loved, who came from Tipperary. They settled in Manchester, but her husband had died before I was born. An ardent Catholic, she went regularly to Mass and Confession. She was hardworking, and took in boarders, mostly Irishmen - including, it was said, men on the run from the law. If this was so, it was a small area of flexibility in an otherwise unbending moral code. She had a daughter, Teresa, who had 'gone wrong' - as an unmarried mother was described in those days. One day Teresa knocked on the door, the baby in her arms, and pleaded with my grandmother to let her come in and feed the baby. Once inside, Teresa pleaded for forgiveness and reconciliation, but grandmother would have none of it. The baby was fed, and the door was shut.

I was an altar boy for some years and served the priests diligently. On rainy days, I would set up an altar in the kitchen bay window and became a priest, saying Mass. Sometimes my grandmother would watch me. I imagine she hoped, like most Irish Catholic families, that someone in the family would give their life to the Church.

One Christmas, I caused her some grief. I had been given a one-pound box of King George chocolates, and was reading a Christmas Annual and chomping chocolates. My grandmother asked if she could have one. I utterly refused. I still burn with shame at the memory.

I was a nervous, sensitive boy, with a certain physical toughness. I remember jumping up from a heavy meal on many an evening, and rushing down the street to join my friends in a game of 'Rally-O', a kind of tag; running and chasing till it was too dark to see and returning home with weary head and legs.

In 1922, when I was ten, my father's sister arrived from Australia on holiday. Work was scarce in England then. Aunt Kitty told my father about the good prospects in Australia, and the attractive scheme of fares for migrants. Two years later Dad decided to emigrate.

However bright the prospects, the break from one's folks is hard. The evening before we left Manchester, my father's aunt gave a farewell supper for all the family. At the end of it, all my cousins cried and so did I, making myself sick. My grandmother was brave and light-hearted, but she felt our parting deeply. During the First World War her son Joseph had come home on a fortnight's leave from France; and I can still see her in the hallway at the end of his leave, unable to let him go; and then breaking down when the moment came to say goodbye. When she said goodbye to me, she hugged me so tight it hurt. I was her only grandchild; and the possibility of never seeing me again was hard to bear.

At the train I held myself well, thanks to the quiet encouragement of my uncle during the trip to the station. Then came the first excitement of our new life, as we travelled through London, early in the morning, to Tilbury Docks. There were large crowds on the ferry which took us out to the SS Ballaarat, the P and O liner which - with her sister ships the Bendigo, Balranald, Barrabool and Berrima - plied the Australian run. Before we were allowed on board, an official ran his fingers through our hair to make sure our scalps were clean.

I remember the hurrying, bustling passengers, worrying about last minute details; and a parson asking if there was anyone 'of the cloth' on board. On discovering there was, he was philosophical: 'Oh well, bang goes a free trip to Australia.' Then the hush, as we all waited for the almost imperceptible first movement of the ship against the greasy, grey water. At last we were on our way on the long journey around the Cape of Good Hope.

The trip to Melbourne took seven weeks and three days. In the Bay of Biscay I was very sick, and spent most of the time huddled in a deck chair, a little ball of misery. But gradually I got my sea legs, and before long was feeling quite superior to the passengers who were still heaving up the contents of their stomachs over the rail.

On board we had fancy dress carnivals, dances, sporting activities. Romances blossomed and faded. It was almost impossible to push your way through some parts of the ship of a night-time for all the couples locked in passionate embrace. 'Get out of here,' they would snarl at me if I dawdled.

There was also sorrow. The wife of a Salvation Army captain became sick, and got worse and worse. One morning the ship's engines stopped, and as we glided slowly, I made my way to the upper deck and watched her burial service. Her body was strapped in heavy canvas casing and as the minister finished his prayers, the body was catapulted off a ramp into the ocean and quickly sank out of sight.

I won a few sporting competitions, among them the junior boxing. In the finals, I defeated a South African boy who had been holidaying in England, giving him a bloody nose. In spite of the fierceness of the bout, we went off together to the wash basins, cleaned up and became the best of friends. Often of a night we would stand at the ship's rails, gazing at the stars and guessing at the mystery surrounding them. One night, off the west coast of Africa, we watched a tropical storm, brilliant-blue sheet lightning silhouetting the coastline for miles.

At last we sailed into Cape Town, the majestic Table Mountain and Devil's Peak rising in the background. I watched a long line of Africans carrying baskets of coal on their heads from the trucks on the wharf to the ship's bunkers. The coal and their skins were almost identical in colour. A coloured foreman stood on a dais, yelling orders, issuing instructions, and brandishing a whip. When some passengers threw down coins, the line broke up in a scramble for the money, driving the foreman to distraction. It was some time before orderly progress was restored. I remember my disgust at one of the ship's crew, who offered two Africans a loaf of bread if they would fight each other for it.

A scout troop was formed, and I was fully involved. The scoutmaster was travelling to Perth to take up a teaching position. He was a great storyteller, specialising in ghost stories. For atmosphere, we would sometimes go to his cabin, out would go the lights and he would embark on some gruesome tale. Once, his arm went round my waist; at which I reacted intensely, and pushed it away.

After a fortnight's sailing across the Indian Ocean, we arrived at Fremantle, the main port of Western Australia. The scoutmaster asked all the scouts to line up on deck and give him a rousing farewell. This we did; but to me it was so contrived I could scarcely raise my hand.

Then on to Port Adelaide in South Australia, where we were held up for a week by a waterfront strike. My father didn't mind because the English Test Cricket team happened to be playing at the Adelaide Oval. He took me one day. The train journey fascinated me, as we puffed down the main streets of the suburbs, complete with tiny stations, to central Adelaide.

Eventually, after seven weeks on the ocean, we reached Melbourne. We hung over the railings, watching the pilot bring the liner up the narrow River Yarra, with its grimy industrial warehouses lining the waterfront, until we berthed at Victoria Dock.

There was a tremendous crowd to greet the ship. It was the first Tuesday in November, which in Melbourne is a public holiday in honour of the Melbourne Cup horse race. My aunt and uncle and two of Dad's sisters were there to welcome us.

We piled into a horsedrawn cab. How different from England! My England had been terrace houses, gas lights in the streets, damp houses, lots of rain, smallness and decay. Here was clear sunny weather, weatherboard houses, electric light and above all, space.

Eventually we arrived at my aunt and uncle's home in the northern suburb of Brunswick, where they lived with my aunt's sister Agnes, a machinist with a hat manufacturer. This was to be our home for the next five years.

We spent a fortnight seeing Melbourne and meeting people. Then I was enrolled at St Ambrose primary school, Brunswick, run by the Christian Brothers.

Schoolboys are normally ruthless towards newcomers, particularly any with eccentricities. A 'pommy' in an Australian school fitted the bill, and my appearance and accent became the butt of many jokes. 'Oh laad, oh choom, what boat did yer coom out on?' they would sneer. 'Did yer coom from Maanchister?' I was too thin-skinned to take much of this and had plenty of fights. My first teacher, Brother Doyle, had a slight sneer in his voice if the subject of 'chooms' came up in class.

It was the best thing that could have happened; for on every front I had to prove myself. My classmates were surprised to see that I could handle a cricket bat and bowl a ball. One afternoon after school I bowled so well that one of the team went and brought the teacher.

He took the bat and I bowled him out in six balls. I was included in the school team.

At the school State athletics, I represented St Ambrose in the 100-yard and 440-yard races, and was part of the relay team. I loved Australian Rules football and managed to get into the junior team. Whenever soccer was played during school breaks, I was in great demand.

Once I had proved myself, I made many friends. In England I had never ridden in a car, on a horse or a bicycle, nor could I swim. Through my school friends I did all these things. I was soon one of the mob. It became a point of honour to take four or six cuts of the leather strap without a whimper, implying contempt for the teacher administering the cuts.

At lessons I was average. If a problem baffled me and the rest of the class seemed to have it in the bag, I developed mental paralysis. So I gave up trying.

In mental arithmetic the teacher used to state the time allowed for the question, then all hands had to be in the air. Mine seldom was. 'You're not trying, are you, Cooney?' 'No.' 'You never try do you, Cooney?' 'No, sir.' In the external exam at the end of the year, to his surprise and mine, I gained 70% in mental arithmetic. I passed ten out of the twelve subjects, and the other two on my second attempt three months later, and so gained the coveted Merit Certificate. I was almost fourteen.

2

OFF TO WORK

The day I turned fourteen, I left school and went looking for a job. Neither my family nor I gave any thought to considerations such as talents or vocation. Money was scarce, and all that mattered was finding enough to pay the bills.

I took a tram to the junction of Flinders Street and Spencer Street, where the heavy traffic serving the Melbourne wharves intermingles with the railway yards. I went into one shop after another, a sweet shop, leather shop, cafe, hardware shop and then a chemist. The chemist's boy hadn't been seen for a couple of days, so I was told I could start the next day at nine o'clock. I arrived at a quarter past eight and sat on the cold doorstep until the chemist arrived.

The shop was near the dusty wharves and traffic, and my duties included sweeping it out several times a day. I took messages to the wholesale drug houses, and occasionally served in the shop. I was paid fifteen shillings per week.

Every Wednesday the chemist had lunch at the back of the shop with a relative of his. They always ate Cambridge sausages, a superior brand which the chemist cooked on a small stove in the dispensary. Both of them were agnostics; and when they discovered that I had a firm religious faith, they would delight in dissecting my beliefs like philosophical surgeons, with an air of tolerant superiority. I argued strongly; but often they presented points of view I'd never thought of, and left me stranded. My armour of faith began to corrode.

I was rarely backward in expressing my opinion on most things. My boss must have found this a strain for often, when I returned from delivering a message, he would say, 'What, back already?' The weariness became mutual, he with me, and I with the job. So when, after eight months, the Victorian Railways advertised for apprentices, I hastily applied. I was not successful, which disappointed the chemist; but there was charity in the man, because he never threatened to dismiss me.

Some months later a neighbour told me that there were jobs going at the Defence Department's Explosives factory at Maribyrnong, an outer suburb of Melbourne. They paid boys thirty-five shillings per week. I applied and was accepted.

I worked in the TNT (trinitrotoluene) section, manufacturing the explosive, and filling and maintaining high explosive shells. In those days, 1927, there were few buildings at the factory. Each building was set a fair distance apart and surrounded by a mound of earth as high as the building itself, to deflect explosions. The number of employees was small and we went on with our work quietly and in no great hurry.

Apart from the boys in the factory, the employees were mainly returned soldiers. Most of their conversation was about the First World War. There was

Ernie the foreman, a dour stodgy man who had served on a minesweeper. He ate a pound of meat a day, though he knew it did his gout no good. Joe was a good bloke, tall with a large hooked nose, slightly bowlegged. He was conscientious, a man of faith, often obliged to listen to dirty jokes at which he laughed reluctantly. Mac McCarthy was a rabid atheist whose bitterness and cynicism came out as a perpetual grudge against society, particularly those with money. Bill was pleasant, a swaggering digger with a high opinion of himself, fond of relating his escapades with women, real or imagined. To him the only football team was Footscray. When I won the 120-yard Defence Department handicap, he tried to get me to sign on with Footscray. I had the speed and stamina, he said, and the club would teach me how to play. I was tempted, but it was too far to push a bike for training from one side of Melbourne to the other after a day's work.

There was George, ex-Indian Army, Clive the sailor, MacKenzie who had served in British submarines. And Harry the storekeeper who had a temper like a coiled spring, in large part due to a continuing stomach wound. He ceaselessly bemoaned the fact that his wife had borne him a son. 'I looked at the little bundle and I said, "Poor little bugger. If you only knew the suffering you're going to go through one day".'

I earned good money; which enabled me to go to dances and parties, and wear the latest fashions. I had many friends. At one time I became infatuated with the ukelele, and would practice until the early hours of the morning after returning from the pictures or a dance. It became my constant companion, bringing me a measure of popularity at parties. Later I graduated to a tenor guitar.

My religious enthusiasm withered. The variety of ideas I met at work had made their mark, as had the atheism of a close relative. And I saw that some of my folk behaved no differently to those who professed atheism. Besides, I liked a lifestyle, complete with girls and drink, which the Church frowned on.

All this led me, one Sunday, to say to my father, 'Dad, I'm not going to church any more.' I expected an explosion; but he said nothing. Perhaps he hoped it was a temporary rebellion and that I would come back. In fact I went further the other way. I no longer believed in God and argued against His existence with anyone who cared to discuss religion.

About this time, I had a bitter row over money with my father's sister Kitty, with whom we were living. Like everyone else, each week I put some of my pay towards the household bills. My aunt asked me to put more in - more than I thought justified. I retorted I could get my board cheaper elsewhere. She challenged me to do so.

Two evenings later, I announced triumphantly that a friend would board me for less. My aunt lost her temper, chased me round the kitchen and finally slumped exhausted on the sofa. When her husband came home from work and heard what had happened, he threatened me with the poker. Then home came tiny Aunt Agnes. She was equally indignant, but I told her to keep out of it, and off she went to her room muttering.

Dad, who was the last home from work, ran into the flak. I made a declaration of independence. Whether he liked it or not, I said, I was off.

To my surprise Dad said he would come with me. I had known things were strained between him and my aunt, ever since he had once given me a severe belting, and my aunt had been very angry, accusing him of going too far. But I never expected him to leave.

However, we packed our things and went to stay with friends of my father - Mrs Bennett, a widow, and her daughter Nellie, who was 'keeping company' with my father. It was a sad end to a chapter which began in 1922 when Kitty first invited us to share her home in Australia.

I worked at the explosives factory for five years. Most of the times there wasn't enough work to occupy the boys in the section. So we either made ourselves scarce or strung out the task. This had become a habit with me and I was warned by Ernie, the foreman, that I'd better pull my socks up. I didn't heed his warning.

One day I was in a building where I had no right to be, ten minutes before the lunch whistle blew. Through the window I saw the Chief of the Section, Mr Stubbs, striding towards the building. With nowhere to hide, I put my head in my arms pretending to be having a nap. Oh ostrich! Mr Stubbs was a first rate boss - capable and easy to get on with, though with a hesitant manner which made most conversations brief. He stood there. I made no move. The whistle blew and he said, 'I think you'd better go to lunch and report to me afterwards'. He had no option but to dismiss me.

I was ashamed to tell my folks the reason for my dismissal. I said that the factory had got rid of me because they would soon have to start paying me adult wages. I don't know whether they believed me, but nothing was said. It was 1931, the worst possible time to be out of work.

3

THE VAUDEVILLIANS

Some time after we moved to the Bennett home, Dad and Nellie Bennett decided to get married. This they did, and stayed on in the home. I too was part of the family.

When Mrs Bennett decided to sell the home, Dad, Nellie and I went to live in Coburg, a close-by suburb. By the time I was sacked from the explosives factory, Dad and Nellie had two sons, Joe and baby Kevin.

I couldn't contribute much money to the home as there was no work around, and no unemployment benefits for single men. I tried to find work. A friend was returning to commercial fishing at San Remo, a small port south-east of Melbourne. He agreed that I could join him. When I arrived he told me he had not renewed his fishing licence, which meant he was up for a fine if caught. Then his launch motor broke down and he didn't have money to get it fixed. So that was that, and I went home.

Why not become an actor or singer? Like most of my friends, I avidly followed the doings of film stars and popular singers in magazines. I had some talent in that line, I decided. As a boy I had a pleasant singing voice and often sang solos at school concerts. Here am I, I thought, with no job or prospects; but I have a voice, a good sense of rhythm, a guitar and lots of push. Perhaps I could break into that glamorous world, win recognition and put some money in my pocket.

The Temperance Hall in Russell Street, long since pulled down, held concerts at which amateurs were given the chance to display their talents. I was auditioned, and chosen to play the following Sunday.

Four or five friends came to help with applause. I sang a popular song of the day, *Auf Wiedersehn*, and it was well received. After the show the pianist said, 'I think you've got something, young man.' So began my friendship with impish Billy McKay, the long-time accompanist at the Temperance Hall.

Billy had rooms in West Melbourne, where he taught singing. Some whom he had taken under his wing had enjoyed modest success in the London theatre world. His secret hope was that he would launch someone who would reach stardom.

Two or three times a week I'd spend the day with him practising songs, discussing stagecraft, and talking over the future. One of his pupils was Stella, a Spanish girl handicapped by a limp. We tried to help her with this disability, and the inferiority which went with it. When it became obvious that she was more interested in me than in the lessons, I quickly stopped playing tutor - hastened by my discovery that she had a husband and child already.

Some weeks later, Billy introduced me to Frank Rich, a good-looking young man with definite stage appeal

- that indefinable touch of personality to be appreciated and enjoyed rather than dissected. Billy thought we might make a good song and dance act.

We worked out an act and tried it in several places around Melbourne. Having got our names on a few handbills, we decided to break into the vaudeville circuit in Sydney.

We left Melbourne on a winter July evening, on the top of a transport truck. Billy came to say goodbye. He had done all he could towards our success. Now it was up to us.

It was bitterly cold. Two old blankets were all we had to shield us from the cold. A thick frost gradually settled on the truck's canvas. When we reached Albury the next morning I was so stiff I could hardly jump down from the truck. When Frank jumped down he nearly blacked out. With the few shillings at our disposal we rented a room in a cheap boarding house.

Quickly on the scene was our first visitor, a policeman. Who were we? Where were we going? How long were we going to stay in Albury? An overcoat had been stolen in the town, he said. He rummaged through our stuff, then went away.

Among our fellow guests at the boarding house was a grape-picker and his wife, a simple, dull woman with a thick Scottish accent. She boiled her baby's nappies on the only stove on the top floor, the nauseating smell wafting along the corridors.

One afternoon, going upstairs to our room, I heard a loud wailing like a primitive chant from the end of the corridor. The Scottish woman was tending the stove and swaying. She had just found out her husband had gone off with a girl who lived at the boarding house. Poor woman. Times were bad enough without the brutal blow of a husband walking out.

We stayed in Albury five weeks. The local movie-house manager auditioned us. He had been in vaudeville in his younger days, and was sympathetic; but didn't think us good enough to warrant the extra expense to the programme.

Frank made a few shillings teaching some boys to tap dance; and I earned a little teaching the ukelele. By the fifth week, though, I was asking for stale cakes in the cake shops, ably helped by a young swagman named Abdullah. He knew the best shops and the best time to visit them. Frank wouldn't come with me because a local girl had fallen for him, and had taken him into the bosom of her family. He felt his prestige would suffer if he was seen doing the rounds of the shops for food.

George, an Afghan whose family owned the biggest drapery store in Albury, took Frank and me to a party at Wangaratta, forty miles south. On our way back we asked him to take us to Corowa, west of Albury, where they were holding their annual show-week. We thought we might try our hand at street-singing.

It was a cold trip. About two in the morning we spied a light, and discovered it was coming from a bakery. The thought of fresh, hot bread with butter was too attractive to miss. But the baker thought we would rob him, and wouldn't open the door. Finally he agreed to open the fanlight above the door. We threw money in and waited a long time for the first baking.

Eventually he tossed out a loaf of bread and a pound of butter. It was worth the wait.

George dropped us at Corowa, then returned to Albury. We tried to sleep in the show-ground pavilion but the night was clear and frosty, and the air so cold that I went walking through the town to keep warm.

When morning came, we sunned ourselves in a grassy ditch, waiting until the town was astir. At the first hotel we asked the proprietress if she could spare a cup of tea. Gladly she did, and we felt better.

Starting street-singing was the most difficult thing I've ever had to do. At one in the afternoon, we put a hat in front of us on the footpath, retired to look at the shop windows, telling ourselves there weren't enough people around. Finally we looked at each other and said 'Now!' People looked up from their shopping as two loud voices cut across their genteel conversations, proclaiming in harmony, 'I'm a ding-dong daddy from Dumas, And you ought to see me do ma stuff.'

After two or three songs we went round with the hat and got nothing except a threepenny piece put there by arrangement to start the ball rolling. But we stuck at it and by half past two had collected twenty-one shillings.

Our next problem was accommodation; it had all been taken by visitors to the show. Eventually we set off for Albury. By now it was dark. Three miles out, with no sign of a lift, we turned back to Corowa and sought advice from the police sergeant. 'Well,' he reflected, 'I could put you in the lock-up.' There were enough blankets for us to make mattresses and also to cover us. We slept warmly and soundly. Next morning his wife gave us porridge, bacon and eggs and wished us luck. In gratitude we sang them a few songs.

Rutherglen, a town in the centre of a wine-growing area, was staging an inter-town football match that afternoon. We decided to have another fling at street-singing. The best place seemed to be outside the pub at the end of the match. We put in a hot, boring afternoon, then suddenly the rush came. Judging the crowd had settled down to their drinking, Frank and I let loose with our repertoire. Then Frank went inside with the hat, whilst I sang at the top of my voice.

When he came out, he had a long face and no money. 'I went round with the hat,' said Frank, 'and all I got was stony stares and blank looks. "What bloke?" they said. "The fellow outside. The one that's singing." "What feller singin'?" "The one outside".' Puzzled looks, then back to beer and conversation. Frank listened. The buzz of conversation was so thick, no one could hear me.

We set off for Albury again, feeling pretty low. Car after car passed. No lift. Night came and still we walked. In desperation I said, 'If another car comes, I'm going to stand in the middle of the road and risk getting knocked down!' Soon the silver trunks of the gum trees alongside of the road were lit up by shimmering headlights. I stood in the middle of the road, jumping up and down. The car jerked to a stop. It was a party of drunks on their way back to Albury. We piled in, shook down and off we went. As we weaved along the road I reflected, 'We're going to finish up in hell, heaven or the hospital. So what?' We arrived at our lodgings safely, but in a sour mood.

The urge to get to Sydney drove us on. The next large town was Wagga Wagga, at the centre of a rich grazing district. Its show-week was starting that day. We hoped for a booking at the Wagga theatre, but they had booked Gladys Moncrieff, Australia's most popular soprano. The manager could only wish us luck. We slept under the North Wagga bridge, with a swagman who would creep into his sleeping bag around four in the afternoon, and not appear until daybreak, scratching and squirming.

Frank and I arrived in Sydney on a Saturday evening. There was a purposeful, milling mass weaving across Central Square; trams pouring out their pleasure-bent cargo, taxis and cars hooting impatiently, staring at us with big yellow eyes. It was magnificent and profoundly lonely.

We stayed at the Salvation Army's Home for the Unemployed, sleeping on straw palliasses with hundreds of others. It was shelter at least, and we were grateful. But we wanted to get to something better as soon as possible.

Easier said than done. Just finding food became a constant preoccupation. How it coloured our lives. It was not just the lack of food, but the gnawing fear about whether we would find the next meal. Somehow or other Frank and I would find dinner, then we'd worry about where tea would come from. Perhaps we'd had tea, and we'd be worrying about breakfast. There were thousands like us across the country on the same treadmill of starvation and insecurity.

We were frightened of the deadening effect this had on our spirits, and we fought to keep those spirits alive.

Sometimes we did unspeakable things to make enough money to exist; and inside were bitterly ashamed. We strove by every means to stay clear of the final humiliation - accepting government rations.

Occasionally we went to a big building in Riley Street where men packed in, waiting for a stale pie and a cup of tea. There were big, boisterous men, starved thin men, men with red bloated faces, openly swilling methylated spirits diluted in water. When the time came for the distribution of the pies, everyone was quiet, while the superintendent said grace, solemnly and sincerely. Sometimes there were more men than pies, so when the limit was reached the doors were shut.

We found a cafe on George Street, Broadway which advertised a three-course meal for ninepence. For a penny extra, the notice said, you could have an egg too. We had no money, but decided to go in. Jim, the proprietor, was Greek, heavy-jowled, ruggedly pleasant. We ordered soup, to which we added plenty of sauce to make it palatable. Then came meat and vegetables, after which we had the choice of bread and butter custard, cake custard or a third variety. We learned later that they were all out of the same dish.

When the time came to pay, Jim agreed to hold my overcoat, which was in fair condition. Two days later I redeemed the coat. Jim told me he was surprised to see us back, for he had held the coats of other people, only to find the police collecting them as stolen property. For months after, we patronised his cafe whenever we had money, and became firm friends with Jim and the two waitresses, Vera and Diane.

My guitar was a constant companion. It helped to pass away idle hours, was occasionally redeemed from Sydney pawnbrokers, and earned a few shillings from street-singing.

We kept before us our aim of making good in vaudeville. This bolstered our spirits. After all, we were in the tradition of the theatre, starving in a big city. Agents were happy to see us, and every now and then we were booked for a show in some part of Sydney. In the world of vaudeville, we met many people, pleasant and otherwise. But there was also plenty of waiting around in agents' offices, hoping for something to turn up. We went to parties and were invited to people's flats for a meal. We were swirled around in real fun and good companionship; as well as the superficial talk so common in the theatrical world, with its biting criticism of whoever might be doing well at that moment.

There was Harry, the most popular agent in Sydney. He had been a female impersonator earlier in his career and he carried this over into his private life. We would lay bets on what he would be wearing when he came to his office. After a night out, he would gingerly take off his stetson and lay it carefully on the shelf above his desk. At those times I sometimes felt it would only take a light touch on his head to send a shock of pain surging through his flabby body.

One person we met on the circuit was Buddy, a tall young Queenslander with great talent as a comedian, revolting in his personal habits and sexual peccadilloes, but intensely loyal. When times were bad, he would be the first to help out. Once he was staying with us when Frank and I were broke. 'I'll get you some money,' he promised. 'Give me your guitar.' I handed it over. An hour later he came back with five shillings. He had gone three or four blocks, singing round the streets.

Buddy was feared by other comedians for he was not averse to stealing their material. When they were booked to play at a theatre where he had been, they'd worry that the audience would think they had pinched Buddy's material! Buddy climbed the ladder of fame quickly, slipped to the bottom several times, but had the talent and the nerve to start again.

As the months went by, things got strained between Frank and me. Our circumstances, the clash of our temperaments, and my stubbornness gradually brought us to the point where we were partners in name only. Only our act kept us together. We had perfected it, and it was the one thing we could offer for employment.

The break finally came when I met a friend of Buddy's called Dick Gildea. Dick was a lithe, handsome Queenslander with a brilliant mind, which he invariably used for crooked ends. He urged me to go through the north-west of New South Wales with him. I put it to Frank. He agreed we were getting nowhere, so we split.

Frank eventually got a job as a singing waiter and began making more money than he had ever made. During the Second World War he was a prisoner of war at Changi in Singapore, and the concerts he organised in the prison camp did a lot for morale. He went on to enjoy success with the Australian Broadcasting Commission as an entertainer and impersonator.

4

THE SWAGMAN

'Hope springs eternal,' so the poet says. We had discovered there was little point hanging around a city without money or home. So we set ourselves a new goal - to get work in the bush, save money, get some decent clothes and return to make our mark. Saying goodbye to Sydney, we crossed the massive bridge to the North Shore and a few miles out rested by the roadside. Travelling in the opposite direction came a horse wagon loaded with watermelons. The driver gave us a cheery hail and spoke to the boy sitting on top, who threw down a couple of melons, one of which burst its green sides, spraying seeds and red-white flesh across the road.

Dick had plenty of experience of jumping goods trains, which came in mighty useful. We boarded a train bound for Newcastle. In the truck we found two young men jumping the trains for the first time. Each time the train stopped they would jump off and hide at the side of the line. Dick, a seasoned traveller, couldn't be bothered, and I followed his example. Our companions became very excited as we approached Newcastle, finally jumping off a couple of miles before they needed to. As they landed in the darkness a great yell split the air, one of them shouting he'd cut his hands.

There was no point staying in Newcastle so we made our way to Maitland, twenty miles north-west. On the way, Dick told me what had happened to him on that stretch of railway line, on his way south to Sydney some months earlier. He had been travelling with Buddy, and they had been walking along the line as night was falling. A flaming row broke out between them. Dick strode ahead, furious, into the darkness. Suddenly he disappeared without a sound. Buddy called out but there was no answer. Instinctively he stopped dead in his tracks. Another step would have been into space; for at that point the line crossed an aqueduct. Dick had fallen through to the concrete drain some twelve feet below. As he fell, he swung his swag around and it helped to break the fall. That was the end of the quarrel. Buddy picked him up, slung him across his shoulder and in easy stages got him to Maitland Hospital. Dick had ripped the muscles in his back and was badly bruised. The accident was reported in the local paper, which gave Buddy an idea. He cut the item out, told the story around the town, and raised quite a donation.

Dick found the hospital irksome. After a fortnight he was allowed to get up. He dressed, got hold of his swag, ostensibly went for a walk around the grounds and that was the last the hospital saw of him.

Most goods trains travelled at night. We found a train of empty sheep trucks ready to head north. Finding an open truck gate, we climbed in, and bang, crash, jolt, we were on our way. A few miles out, we roared into a huge storm which raged all night. Quickly we discovered that bogeys on sheep trucks are not designed for comfort. We sat close together, facing the direction we were travelling, a blanket beneath us and another tucked under our chins. The train roared on, the wheels screaming and grinding, the thunder incessant with jagged lightning. The rain came down in sheets, whirling a fine spray inside the truck. The noise made conversation impossible. Through the night the train stopped two or three times to shunt or take on water, and each time the guard went the length of the train, swinging his lantern. I'm sure he spotted us, but he was merciful and we were not disturbed.

Daybreak came and the rain stopped. We were at Murrurundi in the northern region of the Hunter Valley. Down came the guard and growled at us to get moving. As we jumped off, other swaggies emerged from different parts of the train. We chatted with them, then set off round the town, asking for handouts.

About midday Dick and I, and two or three other fellows, arrived at a convent. Poor as nuns were, they would share what they had. This time though, all they could give us was two slices of bread and butter each. One nun was tall and young with a round face and sparkling brown eyes. When she learned that I came from Melbourne she exclaimed, 'Oh, do tell me what it's like these days.' As I was answering her numerous questions, she stopped abruptly and consternation came over her face. 'Oh dear, I shouldn't be talking like this. Please excuse me.' And she quickly went back into the convent.

Then on to Tamworth. We arrived on a wet

Saturday morning by goods train, along with other swaggies. As the train slowed at the level-crossing, we jumped off, squelching our way through the sodden grass to the local pig saleyards. One of us saw the proprietor of the saleyards, who allowed us to stay there. About a dozen of us prepared to settle in for a quiet weekend.

First we went into the town, visited every butcher, baker, grocer, fruit and vegetable shop, and came back loaded with handouts. Someone had the idea of making a stew. We set to, chopping meat, peeling vegetables, coaxing the damp wood alight. A kerosene tin was found and the stew was on its way. The thought of hot stew on a wet day was delicious.

One swaggie had a violin and was playing 'Souvenir' and other well-known pieces. We lay contentedly on our blankets, reading or smoking, or perched on the rails talking.

Then we saw a man on a bicycle turning down the track which led from the Tamworth road to the sties. He wore a dark heavy cape to protect him from the weather, and his legs looked like two black boomerangs as he pushed against the wind. Dismounting, he leaned his bike against the fence, and walked over to us.

A visit from the local police held no anxiety for us, as this happened in most towns we passed through. We knew that wanted men often travelled like us. And we understood the attitude of country townspeople, who often found themselves in an invidious position when swaggies arrived. Many were themselves unemployed, and even those who did have jobs usually earned little. With so many swaggies on the road, the townspeople were afraid we would settle like parasites, landing them with the responsibility of providing for us. Hence the attitude of the police, who would shift us out of town after just a few hours.

But Constable Hawke didn't just want to shift us on. He was determined we would never come back. A tall, thin man with a face the colour of putty, a big nose and dark eyes, his voice was high and whining as though it had a permanent complaint. 'You're not allowed to camp in here, you know,' he snuffled.

'Yes we are,' replied big Jack. 'I saw the stock and station agents this morning and they okayed it.' He looked at us searchingly and then walked over to the fire. 'You didn't get permission to light a fire, I'll bet. You can put it out.' The stew needed another hour's cooking, so no one made a move.

'I said you'd better put it out,' he repeated. Still no one moved. He walked out into the rain and returned with a tin. Filling it at a tap, he walked over to the fire, and poured the water out. There was a sharp hissing. The fire was nothing but wet, black coals.

I felt like killing him; but we could do nothing. As he got on his bike, he called out, 'I'll give you twelve hours to get out of this town.'

When he'd gone I looked at the half-cooked mess, picked it up and threw it far away. A strong wind came up, so we arranged our blankets for more protection.

Next day some went south, others further north. Dick and I decided to try the New England district. As we were leaving Tamworth, I chose a likely-looking house and knocked on the door. It opened, and a middle-aged woman, her face hard with suspicion, asked me my business. I asked for a handout, and she retorted, 'You fellows are all the same. No, I've got nothing to give you.' Bitterness welled up in me. I was hungry, and I loathed the humiliation of having to ask for food. As I went down the path, I turned to her and said, 'Missus, I don't know whether you have a son, but if you have, I hope to God if he ever gets into the position I'm in, he never gets knocked back.' As I went to slam the gate she called out, 'Do come back. I'm sorry; I'll see what I can do.' She gave me some bread and butter and a couple of cold chops, which were quite acceptable.

Then we jumped a train going south a short distance to Werris Creek, the railway junction for the northwest. It was at this time we were picked up by the police in the Werris Creek railway yards and spent four days in the police cells.

With that experience behind us, we travelled through the night, and left the train at Boggabri, sixty miles from Werris Creek.

As always, our thoughts centred on where to get the next meal, and perhaps an hour or two of casual work. Dick and I divided the town up, and set out to beg for handouts. To my surprise, as I came down the main street, I saw Dick wielding a pick in front of a garage. The bowser had sprung a leak and the mechanic needed a labourer. There was only enough work for one; but the mechanic promised me work at the next town, Narrabri. So I arranged to meet him and Dick there.

The Namoi River borders Narrabri and on its bank was a bagman's shelter, where I made a camp. Next morning I met Dick and the mechanic. He gave us a breakfast of steak and eggs in a cafe, then took us to the town's service station. Under its concrete apron was a leaking bowser tank.

Dick and I belted into the concrete with sledge hammers, then through to the soft earth. Soon we struck glutinous clay, on which our shovels made painfully slow progress. But after some hours' the mechanic managed to hoist the tank out with a block and tackle. The work finished, we adjourned to the pub and sank pewters of beer with deep satisfaction.

My clothes by now were extremely grubby - a dirty old shirt, worn ragged coat, no headwear. I was not prepared to spend the money I earned on clothes. Tobacco and a good meal were more important.

There were a few swagmen around, and I asked them about likely places for a handout of food and clothes. Nobody mentioned the Catholic Presbytery, so I decided to go there. I found it, set in spacious grounds. The housekeeper came out, listened to my story, then said, with steel in her voice, 'I can't do anything for you.'

'Listen,' I said testily, 'I'm not here for charity. I want to earn something. Do you want wood chopped or anything?' She eyed me up and down. 'Are those the only clothes you possess?' 'Yes. I only have a swag apart from what I've got on.' 'Well you'd better throw that coat in the incinerator and come round the back. I've got a big pile of wood that needs chopping.'

Her statement was no exaggeration; it was a huge pile. I started chopping and kept on and on, the pile gradually diminishing. At dinner time she put a nice meal before me. Soon after she told me to knock off, saying she was satisfied with my work. 'I think you'd better have a bath.' A delightful thought.

'What size shoes do you take?' 'Six.' 'Do you smoke?' 'Yes.' 'Any underwear?' 'No.'

I arrived at the Presbytery a tramp and left with new underwear, socks, shoes, and a good coat plus a new one for Dick. She had rung a parishioner across the road and from him I received a good shirt, collar attached (the latest fashion) and a tie. I had tobacco, sixpence and a handkerchief. Clothes may not make the man, but they go a long way to restoring his self-respect. I was hardly recognised when I returned to the others, who had set up camp near the town.

It was in Narrabri that Dick and I first met Wally. He never told me his surname, and if he had, it would probably have been phoney.

We were walking down the main street when we thought we heard a saxophone. There was a tall, good-looking man busking on the footpath, with a sheaf of paper screwed into the shape of a megaphone, giving an excellent imitation of a saxophone. After a reasonable time, he went round the shops with his hat, and when he considered there was enough money, he adjourned to the pub.

We followed him, and I introduced myself as a fellow entertainer. Wally, it turned out, was an Englishman who had done a lot of work with J C Williamson choruses in Australia. We got talking. He told us of a ploy he and his brother used to work around the pubs in Britain. According to him, his brother would engage in pleasant conversation with a likely-looking prospect at the bar. In would come Wally, who would interrupt the conversation and, after a few hard words, adopt a threatening pose. His brother would turn around and deal him a swift uppercut, spreadeagling Wally on the floor. Wally would pick himself up and beat a hasty retreat, while his brother continued the conversation as though nothing had happened. Wally maintained it usually made a great impression on the man he was chatting with, who could then be more easily fleeced of his money.

Our paths crossed frequently from then on. In his cups he was quite unpredictable. He could be witty and charming; and then a fierce hatred and kind of madness would take him, and you were his enemy, a complete alien. Then suddenly he would tell you not to be so stupid, and was again charming. As Dick and I set off further west, I little suspected that I would next meet Wally blind-drunk in Newcastle, and we would soon find ourselves working together in vaudeville.

5

THE SHEEP STATION

Dick and I were wandering through the little town of Mullaley, west of Gunnedah, in the heart of sheep country. While we were at the local store, in came a short, stocky chap.

'Looking for work?' he asked. We nodded. 'I want a couple of fellows to cut Bathurst burrs on a property here. Interested?' The burrs were a great nuisance to farmers as they got caught in the sheep's wool and lowered its price.

The pay was modest and we had to keep ourselves. But the job would last two months. So there and then we ordered groceries and tobacco at the store, and set out for the property, Mount Nombie. We arrived late in the evening to discover a station of twelve thousand acres. Our quarters were about a hundred yards from the main homestead. There were four beds, a huge fireplace and two bare rooms.

The first day was a Sunday, which we spent looking around and meeting the other station hands. Next morning the manager suggested we might like to take horses and round up the cows for milking. I had ridden a horse once before, when I was fourteen. 'You see that chestnut there,' said the manager. 'He won't give you much trouble. Here's the bridle. Go in and catch him.' I couldn't get the bridle on, so someone did that for me. Then I tried pulling the horse, but he wouldn't budge. So I got behind him and began pushing on his rump for all I was worth.

The boss thought I was pulling a joke; he couldn't believe I was dinkum. Amid gales of laughter from the station hands, the jackeroo walked in, grasped the bridle and said, 'Come on.' The chestnut walked quietly forward. I mounted and went off to the cows. The chestnut managed me, rather than the reverse; but there were no spills and I got back safely.

Cutting burrs was hard work. You take a landmark about half a mile away, then all move in a line, slashing down the burr plants as you come to them.

About the fourth day when I woke, I found my eyes wouldn't open. 'Lord, I'm blind,' I thought. I tried again, but my lids wouldn't come unstuck. I felt my way outside to the water tank and after a few seconds bathing, the lids came slowly apart, sticky with matter. Everything was out of focus. Dick had a slight dose of the same thing, sandy blight, a disease carried by flies which live around sheep manure. It creates inflamation, leaving a lot of secretion. For days our eyes were like red streaked balls of jelly.

The manager decided we should camp at the other end of the station and work the paddocks there. Off we went in the dray with George, a typical old-style bushman, about fifty, with a wide red face, a big nose, a black walrus moustache and a temper like a hot knife.

He had been doing the rounds of the outback for years and was handy at station work. We wore Queensland cabbage hats and warm clothing, and had blankets, supplies, picks and shovels. Our eyes were still red and streaming.

Five miles later we made camp in a lovely spot, close to the bed of a creek and an old well, stinking green. After removing gallons of water, it became clean enough for drinking. The water was sweet and cold, and had a pungent effect on our bowels until our systems became used to it.

Dick was anxious about his hair, which was thinning rapidly. After our sojourn in the Werris Creek lock-up, he had asked a barber to shave his hair to the scalp. With shaved head and red streaming eyes, he looked like a character in a crime novel. In the evenings he got me to massage his scalp with a mixture of almond and macassar oils. Sometimes we'd sit round the fire singing. George, who went to sleep with the birds, would sometimes call out savagely for quiet. But we usually took no notice.

A month, six weeks went by, every day the same. The light came and waned. Sheep bleated, the wind swept through the paddocks and rushed up the ridges of Nombie. On top of the Mount, we looked over a vast plain with three or four conically shaped mounds sharply isolated on the vast floor below.

By the time the two months was up, we had become sick of the work, and decided to collect our cheques. The manager tried to persuade Dick to stay; but he wanted to get back to the city to make another start.

At Gunnedah, we opened accounts with the

Commonwealth Bank and paid in our cheques. We travelled back to Newcastle on the 'rattler'. I drew my money from the bank immediately we arrived so that I wouldn't have to wait until it opened the next day. We were keen to get an early start on the final leg of our journey back to Sydney.

To save a shilling or two we stayed the night at the Central Mission. I put the money under my pillow. The next morning it was gone.

A mixture of anger and cold despair welled up; all that work for nothing. With the disappearance of that little bundle of notes had gone my dream of new clothes and a fighting chance to get on my feet again in the big smoke. I had my suspicions about who had taken it, but I had no proof. I was as flat broke as I had been four months before. Dick went on to Sydney and I stayed in Newcastle.

6

RESIDENT ON THE DOLE

I didn't relish the idea of going on the track again, so I stayed in Newcastle and made my home at the Methodist Mission. I went on the dole. We were given two days' work a fortnight, most of it spent helping to build a wall on the foreshore.

It must have been the most expensive wall in Australia. A long line of us trundled wheelbarrows, each one with a mate to fill the barrow. The line waited until each barrow was full. Then on the shout 'Hoi!' everyone moved forward. The loads were tipped down the cliff and then ever so slowly, everyone turned and went back. The men with the shovels again filled the barrows, then 'Hoi!', off again.

George Knight was in charge of the section of the Mission where I bunked. A big, slow, north of England man, honest, hardworking, he would tilt his head back and look at you down his long nose, deciding whether to grant your particular request. George was a staunch supporter of the local church and tried hard to be a Christian.

I only saw him fail once. One evening a boarder named Fred arrived home truculent and abusive. A small fellow who stuttered and had a perpetual air of grievance, his habit was to drown his sorrows. That night he was half-drunk.

George told him to be quiet; but that made Fred worse. He lunged at George, swinging. George lost his head and gave Fred a good pummelling, breaking his glasses. When we separated them, George broke down crying - a big, hulking man, sobbing like a child. He was upset not just because he had belted Fred, but more because he felt he had failed as a Christian. Quickly there were apologies and the matter ended.

One day Wally arrived at the Mission, with a huge black eye and bruises. In a drunken state he had tried to jump a train out of the main Newcastle railway yard. The guard had thrown him off. Some passers-by had found him in Hunter Street, the main shopping centre, lying screaming in the middle of the footpath, kicking his legs in the air, and had brought him to the Mission.

When he recovered we decided to try some vaudeville in the city. Our first venture was a performance at the local Victory movie theatre during their Sunday night concert. The law forbad vaudeville on Sundays and Mr Kelly, who ran the show, was on tenterhooks about losing his licence. So I was to sing straight, and Wally was to play the paper trumpet. The only vaudeville touch, we had agreed, would be a comic entrance, where Wally would pretend he couldn't find the opening in the curtain.

This went well; but unknown to me, he was half-drunk. Encouraged by the success of his entrance, he decided to stick his head out underneath the curtain and peer out. This set the audience roaring with laughter. Kelly was frantic. The house was packed with a silver-coin admission audience and as we used to say about such audiences, the less they pay, the more they want. I don't think Kelly lost his licence; but he never booked us again.

For our next venture we offered the Superintendent of the Central Mission to arrange some shows with Sydney theatre personalities, and put the proceeds towards the Mission finances. All was going well, so I went off for a few days. On my return I learned the deal was off. The Superintendent told me Wally had returned late one night, probably half tight, and found the doors locked. He had borrowed a long ladder to climb in through the church, and had destroyed several stained-glass windows. It was typical of Wally. Wherever he went he would talk himself out of one hole, then promptly land in another.

I can never be too grateful for what charitable bodies did for me. Yet there was always the danger of sinking into a 'mission mentality'. So when I learned that some men were leaving the Mission, pooling their resources and taking rooms, I was determined to do the same. I moved into a boarding house where, among others, there were two theological students, testing their conviction about the ministry.

Ken was a lanky Queenslander who believed that every word in the Bible was inspired. Roy was a crinkly-haired boy from Newcastle. Whenever I expressed myself in filthy language, Roy would look shocked then freeze up.

An incident stands out in my mind. I had tossed a coin one evening, heads the movies, tails a pound of butter. I was set to go to the movies. There was half an hour to spare. Ken, myself and a girl staying at the boarding house were talking. The subject drifted to religion and Ken began to tell us the story of the Crucifixion. I found it interesting, even fascinating. Seeing this, Ken went to his room and brought back a slight book titled, *By an unknown disciple.* I settled down to read a few lines. Time went by and I forgot about the movies. I finished the book that night.

The boy's influence had an effect on me, and for a time I tried to live a clean life. But when women and booze came along for the taking, my good resolutions went out of the window.

Friction developed between me and the landlady. She had an air of faded snobbery; and I was often crude and offensive. I went off to find another place. There was a house with rooms to let in Pacific Street. A heavily made-up woman answered the door, then called the landlady, who came down the passage with a quick thump, thump. Aunty Belle was small, solid, hard face, harder eyes. She gave me the once-over. I went upstairs, inspected the room, then paid a week's rent.

After the first day, it struck me as an unusual place. The second day confirmed my suspicions. I was in a brothel, one of two or three boarders there for appearance's sake. Two married women visited the place, engaged by Aunty Belle for casual prostitution. One of them, I discovered, lived quietly with her unsuspecting husband and child, some miles out of Newcastle. She had reluctantly allowed herself to be talked into it by Aunty Belle, but eventually quit.

Seamen were entertained, particularly from Asian countries. I knew of more than one couple having an affair who would hire a room; and at least one baby was aborted there. Aunty Belle always looked forward to the visit of a Chinese hawker who sold a good range of merchandise, particularly silks. I never knew how payment was made.

Once I was reading a magazine in the sitting room when two men came in with Aunty Belle. Though the men were wearing casual clothes, it was not hard for me to recognise them as policemen. The three of them sat down at the other end of the room, and talked in voices too quiet for me to hear. The purpose of their visit became clear to me some nights later, when the house was raided and, instead of finding prostitution, all the police found was an ordinary boarding house.

One evening sitting in front of the fire, the subject of religion came up. I let loose some derogatory remarks. Aunty Belle retorted, 'Don't be so sure, Frank. There is something in it.' Her face told me that she was serious. I wanted to pursue the matter further and ask how she reconciled her occupation with religious belief. But I thought better of it, as previous experience had shown me that Aunty's belligerent arguments soon turned to flintlike intimidation. No doubt she felt she had to place a small bet on the eternity stakes, and hope to come down on the side of the angels.

I was still doing my two days' work a fortnight and Aunty Belle's was close enough to the job to go home for lunch. As I came in the back door one lunch time, a half-drunk man accosted me.

'You ....!' he accused me. 'You've been playing around with my wife.' I told him not to be so damned stupid. He grasped my jumper and shirt and - rip - tore them down to my waist. Aunty Belle came running out, and the man backed off.

I had a shower, some lunch and started back to work. The man was still at the gate and when he saw me, made a wild rush, yelling the foulest things. Coming at me with his head down, he sank his teeth into the lower portion of my right forearm. The pain was excruciating and I was fearful of him damaging an artery. I chopped him fiercely across the eyes with my knuckles. A small crowd gathered and one of them finally helped me to break loose. My arm started to swell so I didn't go to work.

About three o'clock, a policeman knocked on the door and served a summons on me, charging me with assault and battery. Down I went to the Newcastle lock-up and was put on bail of thirty pounds. Thirty pounds was a fortune. Where could I find it? Meanwhile in the cells, I called the sergeant and showed him my arm. 'Come on,' he said, 'I'll take you to the hospital.'

The hospital was a five-minute walk away. We made our way through the crowd in the Outpatients Department to the duty nurse.

'Did a dog bite you?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'What sort of dog?'

'A human one, nurse.'

She stared at me, then her face lit up. 'So you're the other part of the story! Earlier this afternoon a man came in and we treated him for a fractured nose, a lacerated tongue and black eyes.'

She gave me an anti-tetanus injection, bathed and dressed the wound and back we went to the lock-up. When Aunty Belle heard the news, she immediately went bail for me and I was back at the house the same night.

On advice, I issued a counter summons and when the case came on, the man withdrew his charge and I withdrew mine. His wife had been playing around with someone else and her husband had mistaken me for her lover. The wife had to pay the solicitor's fees and because there was no action in Court, half the fees came to me.

7

TO QUEENSLAND

After several months on the dole I was beginning to despair of ever breaking out of dependency. So I decided to go to Brisbane. I had never been there, and distant fields seemed green and hopeful.

This time I travelled in a light-grey, double-breasted suit and a felt hat, and carried a suitcase. A young fruiterer with whom I had roomed decided to come with me. Ron was a rugged, handsome lad of German extraction who was very popular.

As I knew something about travelling cheaply, Ron left the strategy to me. We bought a five-shilling rail ticket to Dungog, fifty miles north of Newcastle. This would enable us to get on the Brisbane Limited, then we would trust to fate. Many of our friends came to the station. It was quite a send-off for two young men out to cheat the railways.

A few minutes out of Newcastle, the conductor came down the train checking tickets. 'You can't travel on the Brisbane Limited on these tickets,' he said. 'You'd better change at Maitland and catch the Kempsey Mail.' Kempsey was only a third of the way to Brisbane, but that was better than nothing.

We put in a tedious three hours on Maitland station, then caught the Mail, and showed the conductor our tickets. As we sped northward, the rain was pelting down. 'Be hanged,' I thought. 'We're not getting out at Dungog to be stranded in a midnight downpour.' We decided to split up and dodge around the train. Two or three miles from Dungog, I moved into a first-class carriage and found a compartment with one passenger in it. These carriages had deep luggage recesses.

'Do you mind if I climb into this luggage rack?' I asked the occupant, telling him frankly what I was up to. 'Not at all, not at all,' he replied.

So I clambered into the recess with my suitcase and waited. The engine gave a warning whistle as we approached Dungog station. Anxious seconds went by. The rain streamed down the window in quick rivulets. A short wait, a slight jerk and we were on our way.

'Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb,' I thought and, making myself as comfortable as possible, went to sleep.

When I awoke, a grey dawn was stealing over a gloomy sky. The carriage wheels clicked swiftly over the wet rails. On either side of the line, pockets of low-lying ground held flood waters. Small creeks were running high. I eased my stiffened limbs over the rack and went to the corridor, bleary-eyed and stiff. There was Ron, who had spent the night in a much smaller rack in a second-class compartment.

We stood by the exit door, talking with a couple of passengers. The conductor came down the corridor, brightly wishing everyone good morning.

As he saw us, his face changed. 'Hell,' he said. 'Weren't you supposed to get off at Dungog?'

'Yes,' replied Ron.

'Where are your tickets?'

'We threw them away.'

He gazed at us for a moment, tightened his lips, then his face relaxed. 'Why didn't you tell me you wanted to get this far?'

We mumbled something. He looked at his watch. 'In twenty minutes we stop at a siding, ten miles this side of Kempsey,' he said. 'The ticket checkers get on there; they're tough. So long.' He gave a slight grin and moved on. The siding had one platform. As the train stopped, we flung our bags out of the offside exit window and followed them fast. We rushed madly over the shunting lines, threw our bags over the fence, scrambled over the palings and were out.

The ten-mile walk into Kempsey took us nine hours. It rained all the time, and not one person gave us a lift. We were so wet there was no point trying to protect ourselves from the rain. My suitcase was made of fibre, and hung like a sack of wheat over my shoulder. The manager of Tattersalls Hotel took pity on us and we stayed two days there at half rates.

Then on we went through Grafton, swam in the Clarence River, dined lavishly with the crews of timber boats; asked for handouts at various towns. Finally we had a fast trip by truck from Beaudesert to Brisbane.

Brisbane impressed me. I liked the cleanliness of the streets, and the polite, firm efficiency of the police. It had the air of a young city, and the people were friendly. I took a room at Spring Hill, near the main railway station. The landlady gave me the room for a nominal rent. I discovered later that she owned half a dozen houses.

Within two days Ron decided to return home, complaining I was hard to get on with. I accused him of being soft, and unwilling to stick when the going was tough. Probably the truth lay in between. Ron's romantic notions about life on the track had been blown away by the cold wind of reality. His home, and his job still awaiting him, took on a new appeal. I couldn't blame him. I had neither.

By the swaggie's telegraph I knew Dick had gone back to Brisbane, and I had high hopes of meeting him. One day, lounging at the corner of Queen and Edward Streets, I saw him coming down the hill.

'Dick! How are you going?'

'I don't know you,' he rejoined.

'Stop kidding. How are things?'

'I tell you I don't know you.'

After teasing me for a bit he grinned and said, 'I'm Jack, Dick's twin brother.' Five minutes later Dick came by.

In the following days, Dick introduced me to Brisbane: Fortitude Valley, Spring Hill, Kangaroo Point, the suburbs. It was the same story - no work, begging for money, food, cigarettes. The cheapest food available was a combination of bread and bananas. That was my staple diet practically every day. For years after I couldn't look at the combination.

In Brisbane I became friendly with Jimmy Smith, an itinerant comedian who worked wherever he could with country shows. He had found a way to get easy money. The Jewish community had a fund for deserving Jewish cases. Jimmy had gone to the fund's treasurer, saying he was a Yiddish boy from Sydney in need of help. The treasurer had given him thirty shillings on the spot.

I followed his example. As the idea was Jimmy's, he and I agreed to go halves on any takings. I went to see the treasurer, a stumpy white-haired man with a little hooked nose. It was an easy touch; but I only got twenty shillings and Jimmy was disappointed.

The treasurer, who managed a big manufacturing and importing enterprise in the city, gave me the names of various Jewish employers. I contacted a suburban clothing manufacturer, a city tailor and the manager of a motor accessory firm.

The accessory firm manager arranged an interview for me with a grocery firm who were extending their operations in Western Queensland. Unfortunately I mistook the day of the interview and thought it wouldn't matter.

However, when I went back to the treasurer some days later, he asked, 'Did you see Harry Myers about that selling job?'

'Yes,' I lied, 'but he couldn't do anything for me.'

'Hmm.' He lifted the phone. 'Is that you Harry? Did you see a young man named Harry Nimmon yesterday about a job?' He listened intently, nodded and quietly put the receiver down. Then turning to me, he went white and, pointing to the door with a shaking finger, started screaming, 'Get out of here! You liar, robber, you parasite.' I thought he would burst. He was still screaming as I beat a hasty retreat through the large office.

There was one more avenue to exploit, the Russian Jewish Aid Society. We found the name of the lady in charge of the funds, and went to her suburb. Jimmy waited nearby while I knocked on her door. My story was that my father was a Russian Jew, my mother English, I hadn't been in Australia long and was hoping to go back to Sydney soon to my wife and young son. She listened quietly.

'You are probably hungry?' she ventured.

'Yes,' I said, warming to her suggestion.

'Come into the kitchen.' She placed before me a saucer of olives and a plate of unleavened bread.

'What's the name of the bread?' she asked, looking me in the face. My mind raced furiously. I tried to laugh it off, inferring she was joking. But she kept looking at me, so I said 'motza'.

'You're not a Yiddish boy. Why did you come to me?'

'Because I'm broke. I haven't a job and I've got to live.' I stood in the middle of the kitchen, an embarrassed, lying Gentile.

'I'll help anyone I can; but they don't have to lie to me. There's a grocery shop close by. I'll give you an order on them.'

With my father in Manchester, 1916.

With my father and Aunt Kitty, Manchester, 1922.

Setting out afresh, 1938.

Nerves all over at my wedding.

A tense encounter with a rival union leader. A scene from The Forgotten Factor, 1950.

Saying goodbye to Joyce, and Dennis, Brian, Christopher and Peter before leaving for New Zealand, 1950.

After performances of The Forgotten Factor: With members of the Victorian Tramways executive and ....

... the Secretary of the New Zealand Waterside Workers.

8

THE SHOWMAN

Jimmy and I decided to take on street-singing through the towns on the north coast. I had little pride left since my initiation at Corowa, so it was not too difficult. For a time we did fairly well.

We came to the town of Gin Gin, a pineapple-growing area. The agricultural show was to begin that week, so I went to the showground to see if there was casual work to be had. Most of the showmen had arrived and were setting up their tents. There was the Wheel of Death, Za Za Dancing Girls, Tom Banyon's Boxing Troupe. A show named the St Moritz Skaters was short of a general hand, and I got the job. There began for me a pleasant association with the cleverest showman I ever met.

Frank De Lyall was an astute businessman and a master of crowd psychology. He was florid and slightly paunchy, but charismatic. He had worked for the Tait brothers, the famous theatrical entrepreneurs, in the early years of this century. They wrote in a reference that Frank had 'a great capacity for intelligently applied energy'. I understood what they meant when I heard the stories about him. The way Frank could handle a hostile crowd was legendary.

At one time he had been touring with a show called Sadie the Tattoed Lady. Her minimal costume and body contortions made her a crowd puller. After a time Sadie decided she was worth more than Frank was paying her; so one morning she put it to him. Frank said, 'Nothing doing'. Sadie called him a thief and exploiter, then stormed out, refusing to appear.

They were in Nyngan, in northern New South Wales, for the town's annual show. The shearers and station hands were in town and in a spending mood. Frank was not going to throw up this opportunity. So the notice remained, stating that the Tattoed Lady would appear at quarter to one. At half-past-twelve Frank mounted the rostrum and announced that the show was about to begin. By quarter-to-one no more could fit in the tent. Still no sign of Sadie, so he went in to face the crowd.

'I regret that the Tattoed Lady has suddenly become indisposed,' he announced. Bedlam broke out. Frank raised his arms and appealed for silence.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said. 'It is stifling in here. Let's go outside, allow me to mount the rostrum, I'll explain the trouble, and I promise there will be full recompense.' The crowd poured out, eager for his blood if the explanation wasn't good enough.

From the rostrum, Frank searched for a person who would suit his purpose. He chose a small man at the back of the crowd, and pointing his stick in this fellow's direction, began to abuse him. The crowd turned to see who Frank was shouting at. The man shouted back, 'What's wrong with yer! I haven't said a word. Pull yer 'ead in.'

'Oh I say,' smirked Frank, 'just listen to him,' continuing to bait him.

Thoroughly aroused, the man yelled back, 'I'll get stuck into yer if yer don't shut up.' 'Go on 'Arry,' said a big shearer standing beside him, 'ave a go.' Flushing angrily, Harry pushed his way through the crowd and was about to jump up on the rostrum, when Frank held up his arms to the crowd. 'I believe this fellow wants to fight me. Well, I'll oblige him; but I suggest we do it properly.' Slowly he pulled a roll of notes from his pocket, and peeled off five one-pound notes.

'If our friend Harry can stay with me for three rounds,' he called out, 'this money is his'. He looked down at Harry and asked, 'Do you agree?' A roar went up from the crowd and Harry nodded eagerly. 'Right,' said Frank jumping down, 'we'll fight inside.' Someone was hurriedly dispatched to another sideshow to borrow a set of gloves. As the crowd jostled to get into the tent, Frank's assistant was at the tent-flap shouting, 'Two shillings, two bob to see the fight.'

Frank had boxed in earlier days. But this time he realised he had chosen badly when onlookers told him he was facing the local champ. In the first round Frank's craft compensated for his lack of wind, and honours were even. But the second round saw Harry hoeing in with lefts and rights, and by the end, Frank had a swollen cheek and was breathing badly.

'This is when I lie down,' he decided. In the third round he made a half-hearted attempt to shape up. Harry landed three or four punches, and Frank went down. As he rubbed his nose on the earth, listening to the referee giving him the count, he thought, 'Thank God I can still roll with a punch.'

Getting up, he walked unsteadily over to the winner and congratulated him. Turning to the crowd he said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, let's give Harry a hand. He'll go places as a fighter. And now to show you I'm a man of my word, I'm presenting the five pounds to the local champ.'

There were smiles all round, and a buzz of satisfaction from the crowd, as Frank and Harry shook hands. 'Good on yer mate. He's fair dinkum, this Tattoed Lady feller.' As the mob moved out, they took hold of Harry and Frank and bore them on their shoulders across to the beer pavilion.

Only Frank could get a person to pay for a show they didn't see, and then pay again for an alternative spectacle. But as he said, the aim of show people was to transfer as much of the public's money as they could to their own pockets; and he wasn't about to reverse the process.

My job with the St Moritz skaters, apart from helping generally, was to spruik (encourage customers to come and see the show) through a megaphone at the front of the tent. George, the other general hand, was in charge of the ticket office. The skating act, performed on roller-skates, was well above the quality of most sideshow attractions. Frank had met these Swiss skaters languishing in Sydney, where they had come from a tour of South Africa. They had overestimated the entertainment market in Australia, and their theatre contracts soon ran out. So they were delighted when

Frank offered them a run of the main agricultural shows with himself as manager.

Their act was performed on a platform fifteen feet square, on which was spread a mat made from thin strips of maple. The mat provided a smooth and level floor, and could be rolled up for moving. Miss Vera Paravicini was billed as 'the queen of slow motion on skates'. She had an amazing ability to move slowly and acrobatically around the platform. Her solo was the hors-d'oeuvres for the daring act to follow, performed with Professor Corthesy.

Professor Corthesy was billed as 'appearing before the imperial palace at St Petersburg', which was true. To further quote the publicity, '...where his body was anointed with oil, and he was set alight, set afire, to perform with mad spins and gyrations, what is known as the devil dance on skates'. The professor was solid and pasty-faced, with thick black hair plastered down. He wore thick glasses, and smoked a foul-smelling pipe.

He was inventive. During the 1914-1918 World War, to evade capture by German soldiers, he had disguised himself as a nun. But he was also tightfisted. After our run of shows in Cairns, he told Frank he thought George and I should pay our own fares back to Brisbane, and should not be paid for time between shows. Frank would have none of it. For him, everyone concerned with his show mattered.

We got on much better with Miss Vera, who was petite, charming, and hungry for companionship other than that of the professor.

We did a run of shows from Gin Gin, west of

Bundaberg, through to Cairns. Then back to Townsville and finally to Atherton on the magnificent tablelands. The railways provided a special train for the shows. Good publicity in each town, plus the quality of the performance, ensured a successful run for Frank and the skaters.

Not all the show managers were as generous as Frank. I remember one I'll call Dolly Dyson, who managed a troupe of Dancing Girls. Dolly was ruthless. After our run of shows, she simply told some of the girls to get back to Brisbane the best way they could. Cairns, where we were, was over a thousand miles from Brisbane.

There were colourful characters among the showmen. Danny Smith was a genius at switching to a different act, should the first one not draw the crowds. At Cairns his 'Chandos the magician' act was not doing well. So he decided to change to 'The wild man from Borneo'. He and his assistant quickly dug a pit in the tent, while Danny despatched someone to the butchers. His assistant painted up and donned an animal skin. Danny hung a leg of lamb outside the tent, cut off a huge slice of meat and hurled it into the tent shouting, 'Here, keep quiet in there!' Then turning to the crowds, he invited them in to see the wild man, a shilling a time.

The people of Gayndah in Queensland had reason to remember Danny. Some time before, he had gone to the town, and advertised that a famous vaudeville show would open on the Saturday. He got hold of a large, mildewed tent and erected it on a vacant block of ground. Seats sold well. The show was billed to start at eight o'clock. Around ten past eight, Danny appeared on the platform and apologised for the late start, saying that the cast had been delayed, but should appear soon. In the meantime, Mrs D, the well known local soprano, would entertain with some popular ballads, accompanied by Mr J (well known). The announcement was received with sympathetic applause.

Half an hour passed, an hour. By then it was obvious to the audience there wasn't going to be a show. However, when they demanded to see the manager, it transpired there wasn't any manager. Whilst Mrs D was entertaining with popular ballads, Danny had quietly packed up, left the ticket office and decamped. When I asked him what had happened to the tent, he replied it wasn't worth much; if the crowd had torn it to pieces, it might have helped them get rid of their anger. Naturally he had not been back to Gayndah.

The grand finale of our run was back in Brisbane at the Royal Exhibition. The old showmen shook their heads at the amount of money Frank spent on advertising. But while others had to build up a 'pitch' several times a day, Frank only had one on the first day and the public were lining up to see the show from then on.

Frank and the skaters were booked for New Zealand after the Brisbane show, so I was at a loose end again. However, Frank had a brother-in-law in the sideshow business in South Australia. Armed with a letter of introduction, I set off for Adelaide.

This time I paid my rail fare from Brisbane to Bordertown, on the South Australian border. I was confident of getting a lift from Bordertown to Adelaide, some two hundred miles west. I was dressed in a grey suit, carried a light suitcase, and wore a stylish hat. It was a warm day. As the morning drew on, I kept walking and sweating. No traffic passed me.

Then I noticed that the fences on either side of the road had disappeared, and the paddocks had given way to scrub. The road became almost a track, and I was walking up and down and over sand dunes.

In mid-afternoon, a Chevrolet Sedan pulled up beside me, the back seat loaded with luggage, and a man and woman sitting in front.

'Where are you going?' he enquired, looking at me quizzically.

'Adelaide,' I replied.

'Do you know where you are now?'

'Not really.'

He pursed his lips then said, 'You'd better hop in. Bit of a tight fit, but never mind.' I put my case on top of the load, then squeezed into the front seat.

'We call this the ninety-mile desert,' he said as we drove up and down the sand dunes. My heart sank as I saw, mile after mile stretching to the horizon, nothing but sandy hillocks, with an occasional glimpse of the railway line.

Towards evening fences appeared again alongside the road and after a few miles he said, 'Far as I can take you. All the best.' I thanked him profusely and with a wave he drove off. Night came on and I was still walking. Where to sleep? A quarter of a mile down the road I could just see the outline of a shed. Climbing through the fence, I felt my way around, and found an open door. Inside I moved slowly, trying to gauge by touch what sort of a place it was. Having found the flattest place on the floor, I stretched out and went to sleep.

In the early light I saw I was in a small woolshed. Hungry, stiff and dirty, I started walking along the road and soon got a lift. Half a dozen lifts later I was in Adelaide.

Frank's brother-in-law Wilf was tall and dignified. He was an inveterate gambler on the horses and loved his beer. He took me on; and a fortnight later I was driving a truck along the road I had previously hitch-hiked. We were taking a side-show around the country-town shows - a new type of dart game with good prizes for the winners, which had proved an immediate success.

The showman's life, especially for a single man, was free but lonely. We mixed with lots of people. There would be the local dance, the billiard room, the pub, perhaps the race track, but we were never part of the local scene. We were always on the move. One night in the town of Naracoorte, I was so lonely, I bought a few bottles of beer in the hope of making myself drunk. I remained cold sober and felt rotten.

Wilf sent me off with an assistant to work two shows in the south-east of the State while he stayed back at Mount Gambier for the local horse races. We did well, except when a huge gale swept across one showground bringing the tent down and smashing half of our goods. After a finale at the Royal Adelaide Show, the run came to an end.

I decided to head back to New South Wales, stopping in Melbourne on the way to visit my father and stepmother. It was good to see them again, catch up with family news and spend time with my three young half-brothers.

In New South Wales I joined up with the Hobbs family. Their main attraction was the Happy Snaps photographic studio. It was a novel experience in 1936 to step into a studio, then receive your print ten minutes later, and Happy Snaps was profitable. The other side of their business was the Public Address System, just becoming popular, which the Hobbs hired to show committees. They employed me as an announcer. From the centre of the ring I would call in competitors, make announcements, do a spot of advertising and occasionally call the horse races. It was a satisfying job.

Harry Hobbs had been a hearthman at the Newcastle steel works. A furnace door had blown off, inflicting a serious wound in his abdomen. The wound wept continually, and every day he had to have fresh dressings. He told me it would never heal completely. Mrs. Hobbs was a thin angular woman with deep drawn features, easily provoked into arguments and hysteria. Their daughter Jan, twenty years of age, was thin like her mother, but more stable. John, who was eighteen, looked after the technical side of the photography and amplification systems. He was handsome, spoke his mind bluntly and brusquely shrugged off his parents' outbursts.

We finished our last show at Cobar, a gold mining town in the north west of the State. We rested for some days, then set out for Broken Hill, nearly three hundred miles west, where the Hobbs had contracted to do audio publicity for Cole's Follies, a road vaudeville show. The journey, in our 2-ton Ford V8, took sixteen hours, at some stages travelling through roadless scrub and in creek beds.

Cole's Follies was a variety show, performed under canvas, but with seating and lighting of a standard equal to ordinary theatres. It was good entertainment and soundly run. In Broken Hill the powerful Barrier Industrial Council, comprising the main trade unions, objected that the admission prices were too high. After some discussion with Cole and son, they put the alternatives: reduce the prices and they would guarantee good houses and help with the ushering; or leave the city. The Cole family quickly obliged and the union men were as good as their word. Business was excellent.

Harry, his wife and Jan lived in the Happy Snaps studio behind the big marquee, while John and I shared a large tent with power connected.

John had earlier met one of Cole's chorus girls. The fact that she was married did not dissuade him from seeing more of her, much to his parents' anger. One night he accompanied her back to the hotel while I tagged along. When we returned home, our tent was flat on the ground. As we were trying to re-erect it in the dark, the door of the studio snapped open and out came Harry in a rage, followed by his wife. He had found out where John had gone and in his anger had let down the tent.

I was furious. 'Listen, Harry,' I fumed. 'I happen to live in this tent too. I don't interfere in your affairs. Do you mind keeping out of mine?' Harry ignored this, and after a few more flaming retorts, went back into the studio. When the tent was finally re-erected, John announced he was fed up with the family and was off. He wasn't sure where; perhaps to West Australia where he had an uncle.

Still seething I said, 'Well I'm off too. I'm sick of your old man bringing me into your affairs.'

We packed our belongings. Then John banged on the studio door, shouting to his family that he was leaving. It took a few seconds for the shock to sink home. Then Harry, his wife and Jan came out shouting and screaming that I'd turned their boy against them.

What do you do when confronted with a sick man, a hysterical woman, a vengeful sister, all trying to land punches and tear at you? When I was eighteen I had taken boxing lessons in Melbourne. This training came in useful. I kept parrying them until they exhausted themselves, which didn't take long. Then John and I headed for the railway station.

By now it was half past one in the morning. We stood under a shop verandah, discussing the possibility of jumping a train. The street was silent, a few dim street lights hazy through the thin mist, the occasional faint bang of railway trucks being shunted. In my heart I wasn't sure John was doing the right thing. Then he said pensively, 'I'm not sure whether it's right to go. The old man is crook, you know. What do you think?'

'I think your family needs you,' I replied, relieved. 'You've had your rows. You'll get over this one. I can get along; I've had to most of the time.' It was the first genuine impulse I'd had for a long time to concern myself about someone else's needs.

I shook his hand. 'Goodbye John. Might meet again.' We never did.

At the railway yards I discovered a train whose trucks were full to the top with nitrate concentrate to be smelted at Port Pirie in South Australia.

'What time are you pulling out?' I asked the driver.

'Fifteen minutes, lad.'

Ten minutes later I threw up my few belongings and settled full length, head resting on my blankets.

As we slowly left the yards I rolled a cigarette and watched the lights of Broken Hill twinkling and disappearing in the distance. What next, I wondered? What next?

It rained during the night and again in the early morning. When daylight came, I discovered two other young fellows on the train, looking as sorry a spectacle as me, spotted with a black oozy mixture of nitrate and water, blankets gritty and wet.

The three of us shared blankets to keep out further rain. We left the train at Terowie, where the railway gauge changed. In the town, we discovered an empty house. This was a great relief. We could dry out, perhaps wash some of the nitrate out of our blankets and light a fire in the grate to keep warm. Night came and we lit the fire. In no time, a policeman was at the door. We were trespassing, he warned us; and there was danger of setting fire to the property. I can't remember if he ordered us out of the house, but we had to put out the fire.

A line of empty fruit trucks was going express to Adelaide the next afternoon, I learnt, and I was determined to be on it. These trucks had louvred sides of wooden slats, with a covered arched roof to allow a maximum of draught and a minimum of heat and light.

This structure meant that there was little chance of being seen by railway officials as the train went through stations. I hoped to get off at Gawler, a junction twenty-five miles from Adelaide. But we flashed through Gawler and continued speeding through suburban stations. Then the railway yards came in sight and I realised the train would stop at the main station, where there was little chance of me hopping off unseen. I dreaded being caught. We jerked to a halt. 'Here goes.' Out of the truck, a nonchalant walk across the rails in sight of the platforms, and a quick scaling of the paling fence bordering North Terrace. No shouts of 'Come here, you!' In seconds I was part of the Terrace traffic.

I rented a tiny back room, with no electic light, in the heart of the city. The landlady charged me five shillings per week. I put down two shillings and sixpence for half a week.

9

A NEW TRACK

Almost four years of itinerant living had gone by. I had seen men fall by the way, some unwilling and others unable to get up. I didn't like what I saw, and had been determined not to finish the same way. Yet I had a gnawing fear that I too was on the slide.

Sometimes as I knocked on doors, seeking to chop wood or cut a lawn, I'd experience an overwhelming longing to be included in the family. To me, the ultimate security was to live in a modest, double-fronted brick bungalow, with small casement windows, nicely curtained.

But that was only a dream. Life for me was flat, gloomy, and hopeless. The road I was walking, as far as I could see, led to a dead end. Little did I know that in Adelaide I would discover a road that opened up totally new horizons.

Adelaide did not make much impression on me at first. To a man who does not know where his next meal will come from, survival dominates everything.

But gradually I learnt where to go for a hand-out, how to look for the odd job of work, who gave the cheapest lodgings. Then, with time on my hands, I started to look around.

Soon I found the Public Library, and it became a regular haunt. One day I picked up a book called *The eight points of the Oxford Group* by Rev Irving Benson, a Melbourne clergyman well-known for his broadcasts, his superintendency of the Central Mission, and his weekly articles in the *Melbourne Herald*.

The Oxford Group, the book said, was a movement which uncompromisingly attempted to translate the principles of the New Testament into daily life. It had grown to prominence at Oxford University in England, and was bringing a new dynamism to Christian work in many countries. I became interested, absorbed, and then a surge of hope welled up. If what the author said was true, it seemed one could be part of a caring, challenging fellowship which was giving thousands of people a new approach to life.

Benson said that God had a purpose for everyone, and anyone could find it who was prepared to let him take control of their life. This meant deciding to do what he wanted instead of simply pleasing themselves. To find what God wanted, anyone could start by taking an honest look at themselves, and see how their life compared with the qualities Jesus espoused - which the book expressed as 'absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love'. Many people who had done this had seen the need to change their ways, and that had been a first step to discovering God as a real presence in their lives.

The book went on to tell about such people; of farmers working to unite the races in South Africa, of politicians working with their opponents to heal national and international conflicts. The famous Gilbert and Sullivan actor, Ivan Menzies, then at the height of his popularity, had met the Oxford Group when his wife was about to divorce him; and their marriage had been transformed. Benson himself had met Menzies, and he described how his ministry had been turned upside down by this encounter. From then on he found himself working with all kinds of people he'd never encountered before, such as inmates of Pentridge, Melbourne's high security prison.

I felt impelled to meet someone who was experiencing the kind of life the author described. What to do? I walked along North Terrace wondering about it. Dr Benson represented the church. Where was the nearest church?

A small, middle-aged man wearing a clerical collar was coming along the terrace towards me. I approached him, and asked if he knew anyone in Adelaide interested in the Oxford Group. He gazed at the pavement for a moment then said, 'Yes, there's a man named Leslie Parkin, minister at Brougham Place Congregational church. He lives somewhere in North Adelaide.' Thanking him, I headed for the nearest phone booth and got the address. At half past seven that cold and wet July night I found myself at this man's house, feeling slightly foolish.

The door was opened by a tall, lithe man with a large nose and a pair of frank, pale-blue eyes.

'You are the Reverend Leslie Parkin?' I ventured.

'Yes. What can I do for you?'

I explained I was interested in this Oxford Group. I sensed he thought this might be another sympathy story to get money, so I hastened to assure him I was only interested in what he could tell me. Cautiously and courteously he invited me into his study.

Much that he told me, I didn't understand or simply disbelieved. But I was gripped by a quality that I had never seen in any other person. God seemed to be absolutely real to him. He spoke about some of the things I had read in the book. God had a purpose for each person, he said, and they could find it. And behind this material universe there stood a friend, a saviour; if a man committed his life in faith wholly to this person, there would be a new life for the old.

I knew there were two alternatives. I could reject all he said and walk out of his study. Or I could try to find what he had found. Suddenly he said, 'Shall we pray?' I was confused, and replied defensively, 'I don't believe in God, and I haven't prayed since I was a boy.' 'That doesn't matter,' he rejoined. 'Just say what's in your heart. Let's get down on our knees and give your life to God. We've been promised He seals a transaction like that.'

Somewhat lamely, I got down with him and said, 'Oh God, if there is one, come into my life and clean it up. I know I'm a failure. If you exist, I give you my life for ever.' That was all. We got up and Leslie said, 'God now has you. Just trust. Do come and see me tomorrow.' He put a shilling in my hand as I left. As I walked through the parklands back to the city, where I rented my tiny room, hope began to stir. That night I slept well.

Next day when I woke, everything was different. My circumstances were exactly as they had been; yet fear had left me and I was at peace. I know now what people mean when they talk about being 'born again'. I couldn't explain it, but the fact was irrefutable. In a matter of hours a pagan 'down and out' had experienced something that had changed his whole outlook. And something told me that I would be looked after for the rest of my life, if I kept my side of the bargain.

I went to see Leslie Parkin the next night. A few months later, I asked him what he had thought when he saw me again at his front door. With a chuckle he replied, 'It was raining cats and dogs, you had no hat, there were holes in your shoes, and you said, "Gee, I'm happy!" You didn't need to say it, we only had to look at your face.'

In 1969 I found myself near the house. Thirty-three years had passed, and I had the urge to see the place again. Again I knocked on the door, and explained to the young clergyman the reason for my visit.

'Could I see the study if it is still there?' 'Most certainly. Perhaps you'd like to be alone for a while?' I knelt at the table and thanked God for showing me a way of living which had stood the test of much strain and stress, which had deepened and matured, yet which I still found as refreshing as the day I discovered it.

Occasionally, over the years, I have spoken of that initial experience. It has drawn differing reactions. Some people have been encouraged by it to search behind the outward trappings for the living reality of faith. Others have raised objections. Certain church adherents frowned, because it didn't come in the way, or through the channels, they were accustomed to. A

Communist workmate said I was deluded. Self-deception was such a powerful force, he said, that a person could persuade himself that he was living in a matchbox if he wanted to!

One friend suggested that my Catholic background had merely been suppressed, and I wasn't truly an atheist. Who can say? Who knows all that goes on in the human psyche, the essential 'I', the accumulation of ideas and experiences, dormant forces suddenly activated by some stimulus?

God was not real to me in my boyhood and youth. I was sincere, performed my church duties, kept the laws, played the rules. But I had never experienced the reality.

In Leslie Parkin's study I had found no new theological interpretation. In faith, almost as a gamble, I had made a total commitment of all I knew of myself, to this God, if he or it existed. I decided, then God acted. The power to change was given to me.

Ever since, I have loved Adelaide with its gracious terraces and the parkland beyond, its art gallery and public library, and the grasslands behind them sloping gently down to the River Torrens. It symbolises for me an inner experience for which I am profoundly grateful.

10

SETTING OUT AFRESH

I had opened the door and let God in. Over the following weeks I had a sense of encouragement and compassion; and a gentle yet unrelenting sense that a number of things from the past had to be put right.

The friends I was making in the Oxford Group suggested I spend some time in quiet each morning, to pray, read the Bible, and ask to be shown what to do. In these times I let my mind wander down the years. I thought about people to whom I owed money, people I hated and had slandered.

Sometimes I struggled to find the courage to say, 'Yes, I will see that person, and ask their forgiveness.' But I did it, and was even reconciled with some of those I'd wronged.

I thought of a woman I had treated shabbily. I wrote and apologised to her. I knew that God wanted me to be a new man in every way; using other people for my own ends was out.

In those days society was not as sex-obsessed as today. Sex was something you enjoyed if you could get it; but if you couldn't, you didn't feel you'd missed out on something vital. When I had this transforming experience, I knew instinctively that sex outside of marriage was not for me. This was not easy, and temptation was always around. I said to God, 'You know what I long for - to marry and have a family. If that's not what you want, I'll accept that. But if you do grant my wish, I know you'll show me the right girl at the right time.'

I found this decision brought me a great sense of release, and freed me to concentrate on other things. With this decision for purity of motive, including sexual purity, I began to find a new inner strength to live it.

One morning a thought came like a bubble surfacing from the bottom of a pond: 'Apologise to Aunt Kitty'. I knew that referred to my treatment of her which had led to Dad and I leaving her home.

This thought seemed foolish. It had happened years before. Better to forget it, I argued. But all day I was tense. I began to lose the peace I had found. In an increasingly unhappy state of mind, I asked God for guidance and the same thought persisted. So I wrote, asking forgiveness for my part in the row.

Within days I received a reply. Aunty Kitty was deeply sorry about the whole affair. If ever I was in Melbourne, she wrote, I should look her up. This I was able to do later. The healed relationship continued through the years, and I was at her bedside when she died.

I began to think about the thousands of miles I had travelled ticketless, jumping the trains in New South Wales. Should I do something about it? Surely I was forced to break the law because of my circumstances?

If I confessed to the railways, they could fine me an amount I'd have no chance of paying, or imprison me.

Talking the matter over with friends, I finally decided to write to the Commissioner. I wrote the letter four or five times, until I was satisfied that it was really honest with no reservations. This I posted.

Every time the postman called, I held my breath. In due course I received a reply. The Commissioner thanked me for my honesty; and assured me the Railways had no wish to take any action. What a relief!

One day the thought floated into my mind, 'Why not put right the past with the South Australian Railways too, for jumping the train from Broken Hill to Adelaide?' After the happy outcome of my letter to the New South Wales Railways, I had no trouble writing in similar terms.

The reply from the South Australian Railways thanked me, told me what the fare would be, and said they would be happy to receive payment. I was quite put out, considering that I had covered at least twenty times more miles on the New South Wales railway. Besides, I had very little money, and would look at every penny before spending it.

I grumpily rang Leslie Parkin to seek his advice. Leslie said, 'Pay it. I'll stake you the money. Pay me back when you can.'

I went to the Railway offices on North Terrace, a few yards from the place I had scaled the fence on my trip from Broken Hill. An efficient office boy asked if he could help me, but found he couldn't when I told him I was there to make restitution for riding the train without paying my fare.

I was called into the Chief of Staff's office, where he too politely enquired of my business. One question led to another, and before long I was enthusiastically expounding my new-found approach to life. All money belonged to God, I told him, and we were only stewards of it. Nonplussed, he said, 'Now, about this fare. Did we summons you?' 'No.' 'Well what are you doing here?' 'I'm here to make restitution.'

He looked at me and shook his head. 'I think you'd better come with me'. We strode down the wide corridor, and entered the office of the Chief Clerk. By this time I was beginning to enjoy myself. I was introduced, the reason for my presence was explained, then the Chief of Staff departed. After a pleasantry or two, the Chief Clerk said, 'Now Mr Cooney, tell me about these moral standards.'

I told him what I had learnt about trying to live by standards of love, purity and honesty. He responded by telling me he was a chorister at St Peter's Cathedral. 'Ivan Menzies spoke from the pulpit one night and like many others I was intrigued by what he had to say.'

I had heard about that sermon. Ivan was an irrepressible comic, even in a Cathedral. He had started by enquiring innocently, 'Who has read the nineteenth chapter of St Mark's Gospel?' Hands went up in many places. 'Now I feel thoroughly at home,' Ivan continued. 'There is no nineteenth chapter of Mark!' He went on to speak about the way he had lived until he looked bluntly at his own hypocrisy and decided to change. It had meant, among other things, admitting to shoplifting, and telling his wife things she never knew about him. But God had become real, and his infectious enthusiasm for his new way of life had reached into every corner of the Cathedral. So I understood what the Chief Clerk meant.

He excused himself and came back with a blank note on which was written a receipt for the fare. 'We have no machinery to deal with cases such as this,' he explained. 'We get quite a lot of conscience money, but you are the first person, as far as we know, that has come in person to put something right.' He thanked me, and I left in high spirits. I concluded that it was worth paying the fare.

My thoughts turned to my father. I wrote, telling him of my sorrow at the anxiety I had caused the family. After some months I managed to get to Melbourne for a weekend. He and Nellie were living in West Coburg, at that time an outer suburb. It was good to see them again. After a pleasant afternoon tea, Nellie left us. Eagerly I told Dad what had happened to me in Leslie Parkin's study. He listened quietly. In my enthusiasm I ended up, 'Well, Dad, shall we pray?' He looked at the floor and replied, 'Catholics don't pray with Protestants.' I felt as though I had been stabbed.

I had never seen myself as a 'Protestant'. I had started attending a Congregational church because I had become friends with some people who went there. After my years on the road, mixing with every kind of character, denomination seemed unimportant. The only bond that mattered to me was the bond of mateship; the only creed that made sense was 'a fair go for all'. Many lapsed Catholics whose faith was renewed through the Oxford Group returned to the Catholic church. I felt no pull in that direction. I was content to wait and let God show me how he wanted me to work, and the framework in which I could do that work.

We sat silently, and a few minutes later I said goodbye to the family. Travelling home, I recognised that Dad was simply upholding the Faith in the manner accepted by the sectarian attitudes of the time. I fervently hoped that some day we would find reconciliation.

11

JOYCE

For twelve months I existed by doing odd jobs. Then I was offered a position as Welfare Officer for the Kuitpo (pronounced Kypo) Colony. This was a hilly property of two thousand acres, about fifty miles from Adelaide, set up by the Adelaide Central Methodist Mission, with Government help, during the Depression. At the Colony unemployed men were given food, shelter and training in farming. When they reached a certain level of proficiency, farmers would employ them.

The Colony was divided into four camps, with a floating population of twenty-five men in each camp. At the time I was there, it consisted not only of farming trainees, but alcoholics who came for rehabilitation, and men with domestic problems and other troubles.

I lived at the Colony, worked outside with the men, and was responsible for their social and recreational needs. My pay was twelve shillings and sixpence a week, plus my keep. One of my duties was to show visitors around. One day the Methodist Minister from Strathalbyn, Horace Miller, arrived with his family in a Ford A Tourer. After the visit they thanked me, Mrs Miller extending the traditional hospitality to call on them should I ever be passing through Strathalbyn.

Some time later I was invited to a weekend conference at the town of Tailem Bend. I owned an old motor bike and decided that the quickest way would be through Strathalbyn. Remembering Mrs Miller's invitation, I decided to call on them for lunch. Around lunchtime on the Friday, I rode into the grounds of the Methodist Manse. Mrs Miller, who was quite deaf, rang her daughter Joyce, who worked as a telephonist at the Strathalbyn Post Office, and asked if she could take her lunch break early as a young man had turned up from Kuitpo.

The Millers had just bought a radio, a novelty to our generation, and I was invited to the dining room to sit and listen. Slightly bored by this, I wandered into the kitchen as Joyce arrived. She had not been with the family to Kuitpo because of her work at the post office. When I saw her, something happened to me.

The lunch went off pleasantly and no-one seemed to notice any preoccupation on my part. I continued on to Tailem Bend. At the conference, much of my mind was on Joyce. Returning to Kuitpo on the Monday, I thought of Strathalbyn again. I arrived earlier than lunch time, not expecting to see Joyce. To my delight, her shift had changed and she was at home. As I rode out of the Manse yard, Mr Miller, tall, powerfully built, waved me goodbye. Later he said to his family, 'I don't think that's the last we've seen of that young man.'

For days after my visit, Joyce's face kept coming unbidden into my mind and I knew I was in love. I sought the advice of a friend who said, 'Write a letter'. So I sent off a tentative letter telling Joyce the sort of work I was doing; and somehow said I was in love with her. Joyce was at a loss to know how to reply as she didn't feel the same about me.

Time went by and though we corresponded regularly, we met infrequently. By then I was travelling around South Australia on deputation work for the Colony, explaining to farmers and townspeople the work we were doing and enlisting their support.

Early in 1939 I went to the Murray Mallee country as a Home Missionary for the Methodist church, and was responsible for nine small preaching places. The Mallee is an area of South Australia south and east of the Murray River, stretching into the neighbouring State of Victoria.

The Mallee gets its name from the type of eucalypt trees which grow there, reaching a height of five metres. There are other native trees; wattle, pine, broombrush, natural peach, wild cherry and sandalwood. Birds are in abundance: Murray magpies, bronze-wing pigeon, willy wagtail, mopoke, butcher birds, eagles and hawks. Imports such as crows, sparrows and minahs abound.

There was also that imported pest, the rabbit. I knew one family whose sons would ask their mother how many rabbits she required that day, then simply go out and catch them.

The land is mostly flat with a few hills; limestone, scrub and sand interspersed with wheat and sheep paddocks. It had been opened up early this century, when a railway line was put through. My home base was the township of Alawoona, a hundred and twenty miles east of Adelaide, the main railway station in that area.

In earlier years the land had been cultivated too intensively, and erosion was everywhere. When a wind blew up, it carried great drifts of sand. Sometimes, visiting parishioners, I had to pull off the road and wait till the suffocating, stinging sandstorm blew itself out. At such times, a family would cover any food on their table and light the lamps, even at midday. When the storm stopped, they would find the sandy soil from their paddocks piled high against the fences. A constant chore for the housewife was sweeping sand out of the house, and wiping the window ledges and furniture.

It wasn't always like that. There were the clear days of spring, and the mellow warmth of autumn evenings. Bracing mornings with clear sunny weather; the air dry, invigorating, with a sense of vitality.

But life was tough for those farmers. Beset by drought, most of them were deep in debt and being helped by the Farmers' Assistance Board. The stipend which they were supposed to pay me was on paper most of the time, rather than in my pocket. I didn't begrudge it. I came to admire the patience, courage, stickability and community concern these men and women displayed.

I am glad to say that in later years the area had good seasons and the farmers were rewarded for the long years of struggle. Many of those who stuck it out now have much bigger holdings, and today the population is only a quarter of what it was in my time. Good roads and swift communications have made the bigger towns more attractive for business and entertainment. In many of the places I knew, schools have closed, buildings have been removed, and community activities are negligible. But friendships never die. I still keep in touch with people there.

I left the area a couple of months after war was declared in September 1939. I had been appointed YMCA Secretary at the Woodside Military Camp in the Adelaide hills, where a battalion of the Second AIF was being trained. This left for the Middle East in January of the next year as part of the Sixth Division, the first Australian expeditionary force of the war.

During these months the ending of Joyce's letters gradually changed from 'Yours, Joyce' to 'Love, Joyce' then finally 'With lots of love, Joyce'.

On one visit to Strathalbyn, I discovered that *The Firefly*, starring Jeanette McDonald and Alan Jones, was showing at the picture theatre. Immediately I bought two tickets. Movies were not favoured by the Manse in those days. I bearded Mr Miller in his study and asked his permission to take Joyce. He was quiet, and then consented; though a week before he had berated Joyce and her brother for wasting their money on the pictures.

He married us on September 28th, 1940, at Stirling in the Adelaide hills, one of the churches for which he was responsible. It was the weekend before petrol rationing began, so friends from many country areas were able to come. The church was packed. The Miller family and their relatives took on the wedding preparations wholeheartedly, which meant a lot to me; for though many of my friends attended, I did not have one member of my own family.

My best man was Gordon Brown, an architect. He and his wife Beryl had stuck by me in those first raw days in Adelaide. After living in mission houses, swaggies' camps, batching in grotty rooms, sleeping in the open, they helped me adapt to a normal home environment.

I remember few details of the wedding. Overwhelmed by it all, I was conscious only of Joyce and her father. But Joyce delighted in it all; the mass of flowers in the church; her marvellous bouquet which cost only ten shillings and sixpence; her wedding dress, which had been her mother's. With slight modifications it was quite fashionable. Her bridesmaids, sisters Eunice and Phyllis and a friend of younger days, carried red roses and were dressed in white net. Her brother Newton gave Joyce away. Auntie Bessie played the organ while Joyce's younger brother, Deane, turned the organ handle. While we were signing the register, Aunt Zilpah sang a solo. Then into the cars for the reception. The local taxi service proprietor provided the cars free out of regard for Mr Miller.

The reception, at the Mount Lofty Summit tea rooms, was about to begin when someone called out 'snow', and everyone except me left the tables and rushed to the windows. Few had ever seen snow. Smiling somewhat apologetically they came back to the tables and the reception began. Before the end of the reception we had had snow, rain, sun and hail - a fitting prelude to a marriage which has included all those elements.

Robert Fulghum writes that 'since weddings are high state occasions involving amateurs under pressure, everything never goes right!' That was true of ours. Part of the celebration was a solo, *Where'er you walk*, by our friend Edna Magor. When the accompanist struck the opening chords, an extraordinary jangle came from the piano; no-one had checked that it was in tune. Edna struggled bravely, stopped, began again, and struggled through to loud applause. Everyone saw the humorous side, which helped swing the reception along. So we were launched that afternoon into an adventure.

One glorious afternoon, twenty-three years later, we were walking along the beach at Willunga, South Australia. I tried to catch the essence of the moment in a tribute to Joyce, and that evening, penned these words:

That halcyon day, when we walked hand in hand
Along Willunga beach,
The sky, bluest of blue,
And air so fresh and clean;
The creamy, lukewarm waves that broke upon our feet
And washed the smooth-worn stones
Of grey, and pink, and black.
The sea, translucent, shimmering blue
With arched and pounding surf, drawn up and rounded
From the curved and stretching sea.

That halcyon day, when we walked hand in hand
Along Willunga beach;
Delighting in the scents and sounds and sights
Of sea and earth and sand;
And knew through touch and glance,
A union too deep for words,
Content to know, and be, and give thanks.

Oh halcyon day, reflection of that primal innocence,
When all the world was young and clean,
And all creation glowed with light and pristine purity.
Then man was truly one with God and all creation,
Delighting in the innocence of life, and joy of being.

Oh halcyon day, as we've walked hand in hand
Along life's beach, and known
The sun and salt, the sand and sea;
Been warmed and whipped by these same elements.
The Giver's hand we've felt, as we've accepted
Life, and all it brings.
His tenderest touch, His heavenly hand
Has held us firm yet free.
That day, when we walked hand in hand
Along Willunga beach,
We saw the promise of His hand upon us for eternity.

12

THE TRADE UNIONIST

During the war years the YMCA reorganised their structure, and no longer had a job for me. I found work with General Motors Holden, making aircraft parts for Lincoln Bombers and Beaufighters.

Soon after I started, the Government called up young married men for military service. With hundreds of others I lined up at Keswick Barracks for a 'medical'.

One friend from work, a witty bloke, dosed himself with liquor and tablets before the examination to make sure, as he said, 'my urine comes out the colour of mud'. He failed his medical with a suspected kidney disorder. After examining me, the doctor cursorily remarked, 'You're flat-footed'. Back I went to producing aircraft parts.

Through the war years, the experience of faith which my Oxford Group friends and I had found had given us hope at a time when many people were fearful. This was not just something for us to enjoy personally, we realised, but to pass on. How could we do this? How could we express our discovery that each of us has a unique contribution towards healing and uniting our communities?

Ivan Menzies encouraged us to put our ideas together and produce a musical revue. We worked at it, writing sketches and songs which, with all the verve and humour we could muster, focussed on how everyone could help build sound homes, teamwork in industry and a united nation. We called it *Fight on Australia*. Casts were formed in several States.

Ivan himself played a part in the Melbourne production. He was appearing in the opera *Princess Ida* at His Majesty's Theatre, and was off-stage for the whole of the second act. As soon as the first act ended, he would dash round to the Menzies Hotel, calmly walk onto the stage of *Fight on Australia*, and get back to His Majesty's for the start of the third act. He always made it.

The revue seemed to strike a chord with many people. After one performance the Labour MP Arthur Calwell (soon to become Federal Minister for Information) stood up to give the vote of thanks, and amazed everyone by saying that he owed an apology to the Governor of New South Wales for derogatory remarks he had made about him in Parliament that week.

Then the Prime Minister, John Curtin, saw the revue. By this time the Oxford Group was describing its work as 'moral and spiritual re-armament' or, more succinctly, Moral Re-Armament. Mr Curtin used this theme in a broadcast to the nation in September 1942, which I think is just as relevant today.

He called on every citizen to 'subjugate selfinterest, ill-will between employer and employee, suspicion and the baser things which are destructive of national life,' and urged them to 'give full scope to the development of good will, selflessness, honesty, sacrifice, courage.

'This means clear and honest thinking and acting,' he went on, 'and will be reflected in sound homes, teamwork in industry and co-operation throughout the nation. The strength of a nation is determined by the character of its people... I call on each individual to examine themselves honestly and, having done so, to go to their tasks guided by a new conscience... By so doing we will be a nation that is morally and spiritually re-armed, and be adequate not only to meet the tasks of war, but also the tasks of peace.'

Mr Curtin invited the revue to Canberra in February 1943 and the Members' Dining Room at Parliament House was converted into a theatre for the performance. The Governor-General, Lord Gowrie, and practically the whole of both Houses of Parliament were present.

In South Australia we formed a cast, and we would get time off work, and use our weekends, to present the revue to civic groups, industries and churches all over Adelaide.

Not everyone liked it. Marxists were opposed in principle to the idea of teamwork between management and labour, because they looked on industry as a battleground of the class war. At the other extreme, many in management treated workers as little more than pairs of hands with no brains attached. But gradually people began to discover that new ways were possible, and sour relationships in several industries improved.

At International Harvesters, the agricultural machinery firm in Geelong, this started with Alf Gilbert, the foreman engineer, who had long resented Bert Bland, the assistant manager. The ideas expressed in *Fight on Australia* caught his interest, and he began to believe that things could be different. He went to Bland and apologised. Bland was touched by this, and began to open his mind to his part in the conflict. His attitude towards the workforce was transformed. They took as their watchword, 'Not *who* is right, but *what* is right'.

To some, of course, it was not a new idea. I remember Alan Ramsay, Managing Director of a well-known Melbourne printing firm. During the Depression the firm had been on the point of going out of business. If he laid off workers, Alan knew there was little chance of them finding any other job. So he proposed a ten per cent drop in wages for everyone from top to bottom of the company, starting with himself. The proposal was put to a meeting of the whole firm. It was accepted unanimously and no-one was laid off.

He had a similar attitude to his customers. Once, in the fifties, the company won a tender to print a monthly professional journal with a circulation of thirty thousand. Then Alan discovered that he could get the paper on which to print the journal at a price well below what he had calculated. He could have made a hefty profit. Instead, he persuaded the board to lower the price they charged their customer.

Meeting people like him gave me hope that we could change our industrial culture in Australia. But I knew it would take courage; and this became all too clear to me when another manager I had met, the personal assistant to the Managing Director of a nationwide firm, resigned because he disagreed with the way his boss treated some of their employees. It cost him a lot to leave such a plum job, but he was not prepared to put his ambitions before the demands of his conscience.

By this time the war had ended, and GMH had shed most of its employees, including me, and returned to making cars. By now Joyce and I had four sons to provide for - Dennis, Peter, Brian and Christopher.

After various temporary jobs I joined the Adelaide trams as a conductor. All the conflicts common to many industries were there. Wanting to help improve things, I became active in the tramways union. Before long I was a proxy delegate from the union to the Labor Party.

Four years later, Joyce and I moved to Melbourne, at that time the industrial hub of Australia. I joined the tramways there as a conductor.

My interest in trade unionism grew. I went to lectures at the Labour College at Trades Hall; and soaked myself in the history of unionism.

Australian unionism has largely come to us from Britain. There, following the industrial revolution, workers lived and worked in terrible conditions. Gradually they realised that the only power they had to change the situation lay in their numbers, and they began to organise themselves to make that power felt.

Many pioneers of British unionism, I discovered, were motivated by their Christian faith. The movement was nourished in the seedbed of the early Methodist chapels, where the local preachers stressed both the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of Man. The chapels trained working men to speak publicly; and helped them find a quality of moral straightness that gave them great authority.

The British rulers of the time had learned how to bribe and bully men into submission, but found it harder to deal with people who were immune to these tactics.

Men like Keir Hardie built on this foundation. He was a Scottish miner who became the first Labour Member of Parliament. Brought up in the harshest conditions, working underground twelve hours a day from the age of ten, he was consumed with bitterness. But one day he wrote in his diary, 'Today I have given my life to Jesus Christ'. His bitterness was replaced by a compassion for all who suffered. That drove him into the Labour Movement and, he said later, 'the inspiration which has carried me on has derived more from the teachings of Jesus than all the other sources combined'.

Men like him made the Labour Movement a crusade against greed and apathy in those years. They raised it above a class issue, and made it a moral issue. They were helped by men like Cardinal Manning, the Catholic Archbishop whose ideas are prominent in Pope Leo's encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891). This encyclical spoke strongly about the unjust conditions under which many working people lived.

Gradually people's eyes were opened to the justice of the workers' demands. This isolated those employers who saw themselves as divinely-appointed benefactors, and tried to resist the pressure for change by intimidation and sackings. The wages and conditions of Britain's workers were enormously improved.

Australian workers were heart and soul with them. The 'Docker's Tanner' strike by London wharfies in 1889 would never have succeeded but for the £30,000 sent them by Australian unions when it looked as if the London wharfies would have to submit.

There was plenty of that spirit around when I joined the union movement. I worked with many warmhearted men and women on both the Right and the Left, not particularly saintly, whose uncomplicated motivation was to see justice and a 'fair go' for all.

There were others in all groups who used the unions as power bases to further their personal or ideological ambitions. Their intentions were often clothed in high-flown rhetoric; but I began to see through their pretensions.

In my own union there was plenty of socialising between all the groups, except at election time. Then out came the propaganda and the fun was on.

The antagonism between Irish and English descendants is a feature of Australian history, and nowhere was that more so than in the unions. It was Catholics against the rest, and the Communists often seized the leadership of the rest.

We weren't arguing over religion, of course. We fought to make sure their lot didn't win out over our lot. Few members voted for a programme, no matter how appealing. We voted with our feelings and prejudices. You were either 'for 'em' or 'agin 'em'. Sometimes at mass meetings, one trammie would be chasing another around a packed hall, shouting and arguing.

The ideological struggle in those years was intense. Many of us were sick of an economic system that had brought about the Depression. We had seen immense suffering in a war to defeat the Nazis; and there was a respect for the Russians, who had suffered more than any. Some Australian workers believed that the way to get a fair deal was to follow the Russian lead, overthrow the capitalist system and adopt Communism. They tried to make our industrial system unworkable by heightening tension and conflict between management and workers. At times they got plenty of support, especially when management adopted a particularly pig-headed attitude towards their workers.

But when the Communists asserted openly that their aim was to take over Australia by every means possible, many of us began to see them as a serious threat to our freedom. And we were determined they wouldn't get away with it. The effect of this conflict was felt throughout our national life, and nowhere more so than in industry.

The Communist Party saw the Labor Party as its chief opponent, because most workers preferred Labor's policies of reform to the Communist idea of total revolution. So they started infiltrating the Australian Labor Party in order to undermine it. Labor leaders tried to stop this by forming Industrial Groups, with the aim of ensuring that everyone who stood as a Labor Party man was true to its principles. Dr Evatt, the Federal Labor leader, said, 'In trade union elections, a vote for the Groups is a vote for the Labor Party.' I joined the Groups and became Secretary in my union.

I nominated for the position of Vice-President at the union elections, and was elected Junior Vice-President.

But I began to doubt the strategy of the Groups, particularly when an unhappy task fell to my lot. In union elections, several people come together and stand for a particular manifesto; this is known as a 'ticket'. The Labor Party Executive ruled that no member could be part of a ticket which included a known Communist. Two tramways men disobeyed this rule by standing on a ticket with our union secretary, Clarrie O'Shea. As Secretary, I had to give the evidence at a Labor Party meeting.

That night, as the three of us walked down to the city from the Party headquarters, I told them that I had found it very hard to speak against them. I knew them as people who wanted the best for their members. We differed in the way to do this; but it seemed wrong that our politics should sour and divide us.

Not that their faction had much to commend it. Some years later one of these men, a member of our union executive, sat in my car in a suburban shopping centre, and told me bitterly that he had been dumped from the faction. In genuine conscience he had quarrelled with Clarrie O'Shea over a policy. The members of his faction on the executive, wanting to keep on side with O'Shea, had turned on him and he was out. So much for all their talk about proletarian brotherhood.

But I began to realise that the Groups were becoming a victim of their own power, using some of the same tactics that their opponents used against them. One night I went to a Group meeting called to select a ticket for forthcoming union elections. By the rules, no-one could propose themselves. I was surprised to find that only one candidate was proposed for each position, and was immediately elected without debate. I could only assume that these nominations had been agreed before the meeting.

My association with the Groups fizzled out, partly because we bought a house on the other side of town, and I transferred to another depot. But also, because my heart wasn't in it. I realised that there was no point in simply standing against something. If I didn't like it, it was up to me to work out a better alternative.

Many Communists wanted a more just society and saw Communism as the way to get it. I think of friends of ours, Jack and Sheila, who worked for years with the Party, sacrificing time, money and energy. When Stalin died they wept. When, later, the monstrosities of the Stalin era came to light, they first disbelieved the stories, then were bewildered and shocked, then utterly confused. Sheila said, 'When we realised that for years we had worked to bolster up a lie, the pain was so great we couldn't bear it.' In her turmoil, she turned to a God she barely believed in. 'He showed me what to do,' she said, and in a growing faith they found a measure of peace. 'But even so', Sheila told me, 'there are still times when the pain of those years surfaces again.'

There were those in the Party who were ruthless, and relished Lenin's dictum that anything was permissible if it forwarded the class struggle. But I knew that it was too easy to label a person Communist and then oppose him. Evil was not limited to the

Communist camp. Often it was the wrongs of the capitalists or religious bigots that had driven a person to Communism in the first place. I knew we needed to unite those who genuinely cared, of Left and Right, if we were to break the grip of those who wanted to use the unions for their own purposes.

Various groups and individuals worked towards this end. Personally I received inspiration and encouragement in meetings with my MRA friends who worked in industry. These meetings were lively and unsentimental, a place where we talked about the problems we were facing, and were often able to help each other. And people didn't take offence at criticism, if it was meant to help.

There was Kaye Vertigan, a shop steward at Dunlops who became Secretary of the Rubber Workers' Union. His union had many immigrants in it, who were treated pretty roughly in the days before multicultural policies. They knew they would get a fair deal from Kaye; and he was often called to deal with punch-ups and 'accidents' that flared in the factories where his members worked. In the ups and downs of industrial negotiations, where you win some and lose some, his salty good humour and dry wit often resolved a shop-floor crisis, and won benefits for his members. And saved manufacturers more time and dollars than they probably realised.

Another was Wilf Clarke, organiser for the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners. When he stood for the position of Assistant Secretary, he decided to make it a fair fight, and he made sure his opponent had as many opportunities to address their members around the State as he did. Some of Wilf's supporters thought he was mad; but when Wilf won the position, his opponent said, 'I couldn't have stood against anyone fairer.' And this helped build a good working relationship, after the election, between the two.

There was Tom Ramsay, a manager with BHP in their oil division, who was once described by his General Manager - perhaps rather tauntingly - as 'the conscience of the company'. This went back to an occasion when the company realised that they had been overcharging their customers due to a mistake not of their own making. Some of the management wanted to ignore it. After all, they said, the customers didn't know about the mistake. But Tom fought that the company do the honourable thing and repay the money. Eventually he had to take the matter to the Managing Director, Sir James McNeil, who supported him, even though it cost the company $10 million.

And there was Jim Beggs, a wharfie in the Port of Melbourne. When I first met Jim in 1955, the wharfies were responsible for 25% of the man-days lost through strikes in Australia. Their union was polarised between Catholics and Communists just as mine was. When Jim started thinking about this, he began to see that his attitude was part of the problem. His father had been a staunch Northern Ireland Protestant, and no matter what the rights or wrongs of the issue, Jim would never vote with the Catholics.

Wanting to help improve things, he apologised to a leader of the Catholic faction, a boxing champion called Les Stuart, for his bigotry. They became friends, and decided to try and offer the wharfies an alternative to the destructive struggle between Right and Left. They stood for election on the platform that they would make an honest attempt to bridge the divisions within their ranks and with management.

The wharfies knew this wasn't just posturing. Some time before, Jim had gone to a firm in Melbourne and returned a clock he had stolen from some of their cargo. From then on his nickname on the wharves was Daylight Saving - because he had put the clock back!

The usual method of raising election funds was to follow the pay cart around the wharves in a car, and as the pay was handed out, ask for contributions. On one occasion Jim's mob were doing this when they noticed that the opposition's car had broken down. Immediately three of them hopped out and gave the opposition their seats. Like Wilf Clarke they were determined to fight a clean, fair dinkum campaign. By the election date, one of the opposition members who had climbed into their car had switched sides and joined them.

That was the election held in 1961 on the death of Jim Healy, a Communist who had been General Secretary of the Waterside Workers for many years. Everyone expected that another Communist would be elected in his place. Instead, the candidate whom Jim and Les were supporting, Charlie Fitzgibbon, was elected. It was the beginning of a quiet revolution on the waterfront, which saw an end to casual employment, with all the corruption inherent in that system. Wharfies became permanent employees, and industrial conflict declined dramatically.

When they took on executive responsibility they had plenty of vision, but knew precious little about union procedure. Their opposition, stung by defeat, was determined to show them up as a bunch of greenhorns. The first chance was at a stop-work meeting for several thousand wharfies.

When Kaye Vertigan heard about this, he asked Les and Jim round to his home, and he and I and Wilf Clarke spent five hours going through the procedure for everything that the stop-work meeting might throw up. We eventually broke up in the early hours of the morning, dead tired. At the meeting the opposition tried all the tricks they could, and were amazed at how competently everything was handled.

It didn't always go that well. They endured plenty of knock-backs. But their opponents were divided, and in 1971 Jim was elected President of the Melbourne wharfies. He found himself chairing meetings of the Executive on which there were five factions, ideologically opposed to each other and to him.

Jim decided to treat them all as brothers. After a year a Maoist Communist member, who had attacked him during the election campaign, came to him. 'I've been nine years on the Executive, and for eight of them I have hated all the back-biting,' he said. 'But this year has been different.' At the next election he was stumping the waterfront, urging people to vote for Jim. Jim never lost an election from then on, and was President of the Melbourne wharfies until he retired in 1992. From 1988 he was National President too, and helped bring a great deal of needed reform to the Australian waterfront.

He also built a remarkable trust with the farmers of Victoria. This began when, in the late 1970s, he had a call from a spokesman of the fruit-farmers, Jack Pickworth, angry that forty tons of apples had gone rotten on the wharf. Jim investigated, and realised that the real problem was bad communications. From then on regular contact between the two of them helped smooth the passage of fruit over the wharves.

The fruitgrowers had considered reducing the amount of fruit they exported; but because of the better relationship, they decided to give it another go. The following year they exported seven thousand tons extra.

Nowadays, union officials meet regularly with farmers to iron out problems. Farming groups go regularly to the port of Melbourne at the wharfies' invitation, and wharfies go to farmers.

Nothing so dramatic happened in the tramways. But I found many opportunities to bring something new into the situation. At first I was pretty naive. I thought that once my mates saw the obvious benefits of teamwork and trust, they would immediately concur.

I was quickly disillusioned. The response was mostly indifference. Some sneered. It seemed so much easier to put pressure on the nerves of bitterness and prejudice, and produce a ready response, than to work for solutions based on what was right for all parties.

Frequently, management made negotiation difficult, with an almost automatic refusal when claims were put to them. Often the threat of strike action was the only tactic that would get them to move.

One year we submitted a number of claims to the Tramways Board. The Board rejected them out of hand. Christmas was approaching and a few days later a notice was pinned up on the depot notice board, in which the Chairman wished us a merry Christmas. I burned with rage at the hypocrisy. And then something inside me froze.

It affected my relationship at home with Joyce and our sons. I couldn't do my job efficiently, and I was no longer interested in my mates. With some people, bitterness fuels their hate and anger. With me it had a paralysing effect. Finally in desperation, I went down on my knees and asked God for release. There and then I was given it. I rose from my knees a free man.

That was the kind of experience that interested some of my mates. One driver at our depot, Jimmy, was bitterly anti-Catholic, and enthusiastic about anything that came out of Russia. A tall, stringy man, he regarded me with baleful suspicion. Occasionally he would try to trounce me in argument, and I usually responded with some spirit. As I wondered how to get on better with him, I knew that there was no point in arguing. All I could do was treat him as I would like others to treat me.

One week I was rostered to work with Jimmy. Towards the end of the week we were at the suburban terminus, waiting for departure time, when Jimmy suddenly said, 'Frank, I'm sorry for my suspicion of you. It's wrong, and I just wanted you to know.' It took me completely by surprise. But it was the start of a new relationship. Our ideological differences still caused the occasional eruption, and we supported different factions at the union elections; but from that time on we were friends.

For a time I was a delegate from my union to the Melbourne Trades Hall Council. One night at Trades Hall, we were debating a motion calling for the Chinese

Federation of Labour to be invited to Australia. Insults flew across the chamber, and there were threats of violence from some delegates who had had a few too many drinks.

Clarrie O'Shea, our union Secretary, and I got embroiled in a heated argument. A big, florid, charming man with an easy manner, he was an ardent supporter of the Chinese Communist Party, while I was firmly opposed. When the meeting closed, Clarrie and I went down the steps into the street still arguing. I asked him for a lift as I lived on his route home. He readily agreed.

We drove through the deserted streets, still firing at each other; but by the time we came to my suburb, we had simmered down, and became almost reflective, conversing rather than arguing. We reminisced about the past. The degradation of the Depression years had drawn him to 'international socialism', he said. To him the great need was to eliminate bourgeois thinking; and if people refused to change they should be liquidated.

'Even your mother, if she didn't agree with you?' I knew he was devoted to his mother.

He was silent for a while, and didn't comment. We talked on about other things. By this time it was nearly one o'clock in the morning, and I had to start shift at five; so it was 'Thanks for the lift; see you at the next meeting.'

A few years later I was thinking about Clarrie, and remembered the argument. I began to see how superficial I was, dragging his mother in to score a debating point, just after Clarrie had opened his heart about some of the deep sores in his life. I had a feeling that I should do something about it. Eventually I told Joyce.

'But,' I objected, 'I rarely see him these days. He travels to work in the union car.'

A day or two later, who should be standing at the terminus on my tram route but Clarrie. For most of the trip the swarm of passengers kept me busy, and I was arguing inside myself about whether to speak to him. As we entered the city centre, the tram gradually unloaded, until as we neared the union office, there were only about six passengers left. Clarrie stood gazing at the passing traffic.

'Clarrie, can I have a word with you?'

'Yes.' He quickly pocketed his glasses, alert and ready for an argument.

'Do you remember what I said about your mother when we argued in the car after Trades Hall?'

'Indeed.'

'I wanted to say I was sorry. It had nothing to do with me.'

We were both vulnerable. He unwound like a coiled spring.

'Well, Frank, I guess we all talk past the point sometimes.'

Thirty seconds later he was off the tram, crossing the road, deep in thought.

'I spoke to O'Shea on the tram today,' I told Joyce when I got home. 'Well,' she rejoined, 'at least you're trying to live what you talk.'

13

HANDING OUT CHANGE

When I joined the Melbourne Tramways as a conductor, I hoped it would be for a short time. I stayed for fifteen years.

A conductor has to be quite a person, with the courtesy of a receptionist, the skin of a rhinoceros, the mental agility of a mathematician, and the muscles of a weight-lifter. Good back muscles are needed to lift babies' prams on board - especially when they are full of goods from the market - and good leg muscles to take the strain of bad driving. The modern trams have made things easier, but conductors still need plenty of muscle.

In spite of these qualifications, 'trammies' have always had a low basic wage. The Government knows that if they raise our wages, other Government services will cry, 'The trammies have got it, why not us?' Most of us needed overtime and weekend work to make ends meet. So the union sought to add to the standards of employment by concessions and gratuities.

Before the Second World War when work was scarce, a conductor or driver was a respected public employee and needed good references before the

Tramways Board would consider employing him. But it was different in the nineteen-fifties, when there were many other opportunities. Few bright young men and women were attracted to the Service.

In a Melbourne summer, the temperature often stays around thirty degrees centigrade, and we trammies sweated in heavy, blue serge trousers, collars and ties. I can still feel the sweat running down my neck! The union worked to change this, and today tram crews wear uniforms more suited to our climate.

But the work had its compensations. If you liked mixing with people, it was laid on for you. If you loathed sitting at an office desk, there was plenty of fresh air and plenty to see, even if you had to stay on the same track. You didn't have a factory foreman breathing down your neck for more production. So long as you did your work honestly you were seldom bothered by tramway officials.

And there was a camaraderie amongst the trammies, a spirit only found among people who work closely together like wharfies, railwaymen and miners. This comradeship was usually given a dose of shock treatment at union election time, when political and sectarian animosities were inflamed to win votes. But after the dust had settled, we were mostly one body of men again.

The worst scourge for a conductor was rough drivers. The times I have cursed them, as I lurched down the tram collecting fares! Sometimes the driver was in a sour mood; but I didn't always make allowances for their difficulties, struggling as they were with the safety of the passengers, the timetable, and crazy car drivers. Whatever the cause, bad-tempered criticism usually made things worse, so I had to learn to lighten the driver's load with a cheery word or helping hand. When driver and conductor got on well, it made a big difference to the day's work.

Sometimes I discovered what lay behind the sour mood. One evening a fellow trammie, George, was in our home for a meal. A big, rawboned lad from the north of England, I had often sensed a deep unhappiness in him. We talked on after everyone else had left the table, ranging far and wide. Towards the end of the evening, as he got up to go, I had the uneasy sense that he had talked about everything except the thing most on his mind. I suggested we be quiet for a moment or two. In that moment, I found myself thinking about his home in England. How were things there, I asked him. It was like uncorking a bottle. He burst out, 'I hate my mother. One day in a drunken fit, she told me I was a mistake and should never have been born. All these years it's burned in my guts. Sometimes when I think of it, I feel like throwing myself under a tram.' We began to talk from the heart. He listened intently as I told him how I had got free of hate.

A tram holds a world in miniature; a moving, changing mass of ordinary people. Here come and go the haughty matron, the giggling teenager, the doll, the drunkard, the blind, the crippled, the grimy worker, the businessman, the fare-dodger.

The conductor can do a lot to create a pleasant atmosphere between them all. There are always people needing help. And every now and then an argument breaks out between passengers, or between passenger and conductor, and diplomatic skills are called for.

You have to keep a sense of humour through it all. A large woman asked me to put her down between stops, and was angry when I told her that the regulations did not permit that, for very sound reasons. As she alighted slowly and heavily at the next stop, she fixed me with a hard stare and said, 'You are the worst man I have ever met in my life, and what's more, you look it.' I bowed and replied, 'Madam, you are a lady, and you look it.' She looked suitably nonplussed.

Today the trams are staffed, to a large extent, by recent immigrants to Australia, whose English is often limited. But humour can still break through. A Scots friend of mine boarded a tram in Melbourne recently; and asked the conductress in his broad Glaswegian how much the fare was. Finding it hard to understand her accent, he had to ask her twice to repeat her reply before he caught it. As she gave him his ticket she grinned at him and said, 'Mein Gott, you foreigners!'

Passengers can help conductors. I remember one mild summer day when we were travelling from the city to St Kilda beach, a popular resort close to the city, after morning peak hour. St Kilda Road was a pleasant run, shady lawns, the sun shining through the big dappled leaves of the plane trees that lined the route. A soft breeze was taking the edge off any real heat.

A man staggered onto the tram, his breath giving powerful evidence of a heavy bout of drinking. I eyed him distastefully and asked with a veneer of politeness for his fare. He fished out a coin, looked at me with glazed eyes, mouth half open and muttered something unintelligible. I took a guess at the fare he wanted, and contemptuously pushed the ticket into his open pudgy hand. He stood there, the ticket lying in his hand; then the breeze gently blew it down to the tram platform.

A slightly built man moved forward, picked up the ticket, gave it back it to the man and made sure he had a good hold on it, then returned to his seat. A few moments later, he lifted his pale bearded face and said, 'You don't feel happy, do you?' Surprised, I turned and replied, 'No, I don't.' 'Your anger towards this man is poisoning you. You need harmony and peace.' Not a usual conversation on a tram; but as I reflected on it, I decided he had a point. 'Thanks,' I said to him as he left the tram a few stops later. I never saw him again, but what he said changed the way I treated drunken passengers.

An argument can be embarrassing, especially one with a regular passenger. A middle-aged lady and I clashed over the amount of money she had given me for the fare. It was evening peak hour, the tram was packed, and after I had collected the fares, I retired to the back of the tram to sort my money out. I found a coin in the wrong section of my cash till, and it was obvious the lady had been right. Grudgingly I admitted this to myself. 'Admit it to the lady,' a voice seemed to say inside me. My feet were glued to the floor. As we got closer to her stop, I walked down the tram feeling very uncomfortable. When I told her, she jumped to her feet with a smile of relief on her face. 'I'm so glad!' she exclaimed. 'Not that I cared whether I was right, but I was upset at the bad feeling between us.' From that moment we became friends.

Thinking about this one day, I wrote a song, which I have been asked to sing to all kinds of audiences, from a gathering of workers at a Sri Lankan power station to the city councillors of Dunedin in the Mayoral chamber:

Every day I meet some funny people,
Folks who look the same as you and me.
Up and down the tram, pushing through a jam,
Filling up my bag with cash, you see!
Some kind person offers me ten dollars,
Says to me, 'I want a five cent fare'!
Then I bite my bottom lip, so a little word won't slip,
And somehow, change is in the air.

I'm handing out change every day
For it seems that most of us need it.
But the sort of change we need
To give us all a new start
Is not in your pocket, but right in your heart.
And then we'll start living o.k.,
And we'll all know where we're going,
So let's change our destination,
Build teamwork in the nation
And we'll change every day.

14

THE DRIVER

There is a song I used to hum on the trams: 'The world walked into my heart today; black and white, brown and yellow; the bitter man and the man that's mellow; the statesman, yes, and the ordinary fellow; they all walked into my heart.'

But by the time I'd been a conductor for eight years, I had become weary of the world walking on to my feet! Feeling in need of a change, I applied to be a tram-driver, and was accepted.

My training started with a day at the driving school. Then into the traffic under the guidance of an instructor. After ninety-six working hours under his eagle eye, I went back to the school to sit for an examination on the book of regulations.

Then I was on my own. For the first half-hour I had the jitters. Experience brought confidence and after a few months, a degree of cockiness which led to my undoing on occasions.

There was plenty to enjoy, and soon people were hearing me express my approach to life in a new song:

Billy Jones is an ordinary fellow,
a driver on the Melbourne trams.
Sometimes he'd whistle,
and sometimes he'd holler,
when caught up in a traffic jam.
Up and down, in and out of town,
he would roll along.
And the passengers inside the car
would hear him sing this song.

Keep the pole on the overhead wire.
It's the power that makes things hum.
If the pole comes off everything goes dead.
It's got to be put right and then you move ahead.
Take a tip from the pole and the wire,
and your life will start to hum.
That private war or family row
will vanish like the mist if you will take a vow
to keep in touch, yes, start right now to
keep the pole on the wire.

The song was light-hearted, but it said something which was important for me. I couldn't do my job properly unless I had peace in my heart. Even as a conductor, I had felt that a driver was underpaid for the responsibility he carried. A driver couldn't relax except at meal times or terminus stopovers. It was constant vigilance, anticipating cars, trucks and pedestrians.

One evening during peak hour, we were putting down passengers at a busy suburban intersection. It was growing dark, car lights were coming on. An inspector was on duty, and when the passengers had boarded he waved me on.

I slowly moved to the intersection, then heard a car coming from my right at high speed, and saw a rapid reflection of headlights in the shop windows. My stomach tightened, for I knew the driver wasn't going to stop. I pulled up. An impatient Volkswagen driver shot past me into the junction and collided with the other car with a mighty bang.

The little Morris tourer ricocheted off the Volkswagen and crashed into the wall of an undertaker's parlour. The Volkswagen whined crazily out of control in the middle of the road. Surprisingly, no-one was seriously injured.

Some weeks later I was called into the depot office. The Volkswagen's insurance company was trying to pin the blame on me, claiming my tram had obstructed the driver's view at the intersection. Fortunately the inspector was there to give evidence. In his opinion, he said, the tram-driver was the only one to show any common sense.

Dramatic happenings seemed to occur at peak hour. Close to a busy shopping centre, one of our routes crossed railway lines. At such crossings there was a contraption known as a 'square' or 'box' in which both the railway and tramway wires were 'dead'. The railways operated on a voltage of 1500 DC, the tramways on 600 DC, and the 'box' was designed to make sure the power systems were isolated from each other. The tram driver had to make enough speed to coast over the 'box', then pick up power on the other side.

I was waiting at the railway crossing behind a small one-man operated tram. The gates opened and we both moved off. Suddenly the small tram stalled, and I had to stop quickly, which left my overhead pole plumb in the centre of the box. No power. What to do? The tram was equipped with two poles, one at each end, and the front of the tram was past the 'box'. So I jumped down and put the front pole up. As soon as it touched the wire, there was a roar, and I was showered with a cascade of yellow sparks. There was a loud bang in the tram, black smoke belched out of the driving controller, and the passengers scrambled madly on to the road. I was dazed by the continuing shower of sparks. Finally I groped for the pole rope and got the pole off the wire. Immediately the sparks stopped, and I got my breath. Inspecting the tram, the only damage seemed to be to the driving controller, which was covered with black soot and stank. I pulled down the pole which was still in the rail 'box', put the front pole up again, gingerly tried out a notch of power on the control and heaved a sigh of relief to find that it was still operational.

Then I discovered that the one-man tram, by now in the middle of the shopping centre, had become part of the drama. When I was being showered with yellow sparks, a sheet of flame had raced along the wire and hit this tram. All the fuses had blown with a loud bang, and the inside of the roof had caught fire. It was still burning, and there was panic all round.

The cause of the trouble was simple. The 'box' which was supposed to be dead was alive. When I hoisted my front pole, it became a conductor for the full blast of the railways' 1500 volts.

There was an immediate inquiry. I was questioned closely. I never did hear the result.

After I had been driving for six years I became increasingly unwell. Our family doctor decided that this was due to the constant strain of driving, and the amount of compulsory overtime which had to be worked. I was given a few weeks' leave, and then went back.

One morning, while driving through busy St Kilda with a packed tram, my hands suddenly began to shake. I had a terrible feeling in my stomach, and thought I was going to die. Somehow I finished the trip into the city and back, and went home for lunch. I was working what is known as a broken shift; part in the morning, the remainder in late afternoon. I dragged myself home, my legs feeling like lead. I flopped on the bed, my heart racing and tears streaming down my cheeks.

Joyce thought I was having a heart attack and hurriedly called the doctor. As he hadn't arrived by the time I had to return to work, and I was feeling a little better, I decided to go back and see the day out. The next morning I went to the surgery. As I got there, my legs began to feel like lead again and tears began uncontrollably.

'What's this?' said the doctor. I couldn't reply, but sat there about to pass out. He handed me a black paper bag, and said, 'Breathe into this, and what you breathe out, breathe in again. You'll be alright.' As I did this, he examined me, tapping me here and there. Presently I began to feel better. 'For some years doctors looked on this condition as a heart attack,' he said.

'Tension has made your nervous system go haywire. That has upset your blood circulation. One effect is that your blood is losing too much carbon-dioxide. The air you've breathed in the bag has carbon-dioxide in it.

'There's nothing organically wrong with you,' he assured me. 'But you will have to quit your job.'

After a month's break I went back as a conductor, and after a while resumed driving. Twelve months later, the same symptoms appeared. My doctor wrote a recommendation that I be taken off driving for six months, and by that time I might be able to resume duty.

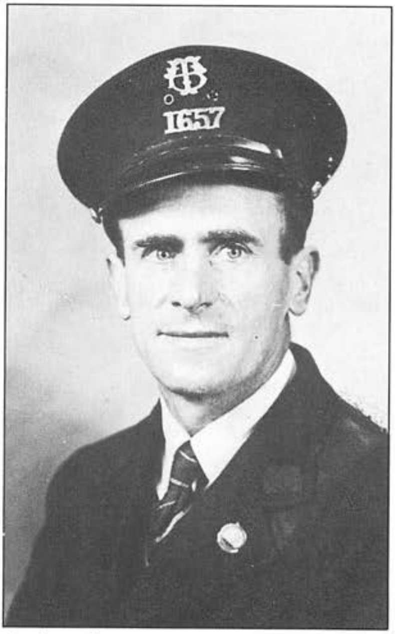
The Board consulted their doctor, and refused to accept responsibility for my condition. If I had broken a limb, or could prove organic damage, that would have been different. A nervous disorder was considered too ambiguous. And my doctor's opinion counted for nothing. Neither was the Board obliged to give me any compensation for long service leave. I think that today there is a more enlightened approach on both these issues.

So I was given a gratuity lump sum of $543.40 and said goodbye to my mates. It hurt my pride to tell them that I couldn't cope with driving, but I discovered that several of them were living on powders to keep going. At the age of fifty-four, I was again on the labour market.

The boys were still at home, though only Stephen, the youngest, was still at school. Our mortgage payments wouldn't finish for ten more years. Who would want a man of my age?

I needn't have worried. Before long I landed a job as a storeman and packer with Coats-Patons, the cotton

Joyce with Stephen and our dog Pancho outside our Murrumbeena home.



A photo from my campaign material for the union election, 1952.

Joyce and I with my father and Nellie, and a friend, at a performance of We are Tomorrow.

Some of our cast with Cardinal Gilroy (left)

Fellow unionists Kaye Vertigan (left), Jim Beggs (second from right) and Wilf Clarke (right) with visitor to Melbourne.

Golden Wedding, 1990.

With Joyce and our five sons. l to r Brian, Christopher, Peter, Dennis, Stephen.

Speaking from the stage to the audience in Mount Isa.

manufacturers. It was a steady, quiet job. No shift work, no more crazy meal hours.

Then I was offered work with a management consultant friend who specialised in helping Australian and overseas companies to manufacture products under licence. I ran the small office, and helped to produce a monthly Research and Development News Service. After two years, an economic downturn meant the consultant was no longer able to employ me.

I was sixty-two. Three years before the old age pension! I heard that Edgell-Birds Eye frozen foods were starting a new stock control method, and I applied, assuring the management I wouldn't be leaving to go elsewhere. I stayed with them for four years. My boss was a pleasant man and, apart from the cigars he smoked all day long, I enjoyed my time there. The flexibility between the management and staff on working hours was a great asset.

Some weeks after retirement, to our surprise, Joyce and I were on our way to India, to help stage a series of plays in New Delhi.

15

REFLECTIONS IN A MIRROR

The stage has always been close to my heart, ever since those days as a vaudeville artist during the Depression. Every now and then I have found myself involved in some stage production.

The stage mirrors life. It reflects laughter, tears, hate, love, moments of ecstasy, the pain of despair. The great Scottish poet Robbie Burns lamented, 'Oh would some power the giftie gie us, To see oursels' as ithers see us?' A play can do that. Watch an audience absorbed in a performance. Note the shaking or nodding of heads, heads thrown back in laughter, the knowing look, shuffling of feet, the dig in the ribs. Reflections in a mirror. George Bernard Shaw once said that what the people saw on the stage that night, they would be doing in the streets the next day.

Many plays offer unredeemed tragedy, meaningless pain, dirt and dreariness, cruelty for kicks. Some of us involved in MRA decided to offer another view of life.

I have already mentioned our wartime musical revue *Fight on Australia*. Having seen its impact, we looked for a play to stage after the war. We chose *The*

Forgotten Factor by Alan Thornhill. This is the story of an industrial strike. It portrays the steely attitudes of management and union leaders and, with great sympathy for both sides, shows what has shaped those attitudes. Then it goes on to illustrate what can happen when 'the forgotten factor' - a change of heart - comes in. Written in America, it was described by President Harry Truman as 'the most important play to come out of the War', because he had seen it transform labour-management relationships in several industries. Since then it has played in many countries, in many languages.

We felt it had something to say to Australia. So we got a cast together and launched it in Geelong near Melbourne. I played the part of Rankine, a union leader whose bitter experiences of the Depression fuel his aggression.

We chose Geelong because it was the home of the International Harvester Company, and some of our friends there, in both management and unions, asked us to help them spread the new attitudes they were finding.

The Assistant Manager, Bert Bland, invited many people to the play - including a man who, in previous years, he had tried to get the company to sack. Bernie Burke caused the company constant trouble.

Bernie's life is an incredible story of poverty and cruelty. Born in Liverpool, England, of Irish parents, his father was a seaman who, after being blown up in the First World War, turned to alcohol. Bernie was expelled from school, then thrown out of his home after a fight with his father. He got a job on a boat to Australia but, because some of the crew went on strike during the voyage, he was dumped ashore on arrival and never paid. He got a job in a local pub - and married a girl who worked there too. When they were both sacked, he joined the Communist Party, and distributed food to the unemployed during the Depression. He loathed the whole capitalist system and all its henchmen, among which he included the Church.

Some years later, Cresco Fertilisers gave him a job. The working conditions confirmed everything he felt about capitalism. 'The fumes burnt the clothes off our backs,' he says. A health inspector was called, and Bernie stated his case in his most acid-eaten shirt. The workers got three shillings acid money in their pay. Bernie got the sack.

His reputation as a stirrer made it hard to find work. He eventually managed to see the manager of International Harvesters by telling the secretary his five children would starve if he didn't get a job. The manager surprised him by treating him courteously, and employed him cleaning packing cases, far away from the rest of the workforce. But distance proved little barrier to his ability to create trouble.

Bernie, however, had seen a change in Bert Bland. So he accepted Bert's invitation to the play. After the performance, he went home shaken. 'The union bloke on that stage was exactly me,' he told us later. 'I thought of all the dishonest fights I'd got into, just like him.'

That night he thought back to an incident which had happened when he was in hospital for a serious operation, and had nearly died on the operating table. He had dreamt he was flying uncontrollably through the air, crying out, 'Don't take me, I want to go back to my children.' It had left him feeling that there was a God to be reckoned with. Now *The Forgotten Factor* showed him a God who understood the hurts he had been through, and could free him. 'I prayed deeply to change and to practice a life free of hate.' Faith became real.

From then on he was still a militant, but not a wrecker. He organised regular lunch meetings in the canteen for workers and supervisors to thrash out the problems they faced. Life at home became very different too. 'Ours was a rocky marriage,' he says ruefully, 'mainly due to my drunkenness and domination of the home by argument. But all that is finished.' When, years later, his wife became incurably ill, Bernie retired from work at the age of fifty to nurse her; and was with her constantly till she died.

We went on to stage *The Forgotten Factor* in Melbourne several times in the next year or two. Then we were invited to take it to New Zealand. The letter of invitation was signed by members of New Zealand's Cabinet and the Mayors of the main cities; so it was hard to refuse, though for many of us it meant taking unpaid leave, and working out how our families would be cared for while we were away.

At the time, the Empire Games were being held in Auckland, and every berth, on ship and plane, had been booked out weeks before. But we kept planning towards the date of our departure, hoping that something would come up.

George Wood, a delightful Scot working with us, had a friend in shipping. One day the friend phoned.

'George', he said, 'the White Star line has the *Athenic* in port. It was to go back to Britain via Suez, but it's been diverted to New Zealand to pick up a consignment of dairy produce and return via Panama. They have eighty berths. How many would you like?'

Forty of us went. In three months we played to thirty-three thousand people in thirty performances. In Auckland fifteen thousand saw it. Many newspapers commented; there was even a cartoon or two.

Most theatre critics were favourable, as were labour publications, except for some which couldn't stomach an approach so different to the philosophy of class war. We were invited to speak at factories, union meetings, colleges, industrial associations, civic functions. In Auckland I found myself speaking to 400 waterside workers at a meeting chaired by their President, Alec Drennan, a former President of New Zealand's Communist Party.

While *The Forgotten Factor* was showing how attitudes and relationships can change, we in the cast were finding we needed its message just as much.

Six of us were sitting among the props on the stage at Auckland's Playhouse Theatre, when Kitty, who played the part of Lil Rankine, cut through the general conversation, announcing she had something important to say. She was Canadian, short and solid, with a wry sense of humour. An able actor, she had come through the trauma of a broken marriage, which had left deep scars.

Quietly and with difficulty, she said she regretted she couldn't play opposite me any more, because I had a terrible temper, and was always taking it out on her on stage. 'I can't stand up against you,' she said. 'Either you quit, or I'll have to.'

I looked at her in disbelief. But I began to realise she had focussed an uneasy relationship which had grown between us. Passing each other in the wings awaiting our entrance cues, Kitty sometimes had an almost cringing posture. Often her friend Sunny would have an arm around Kitty's shoulders, and would give me a baleful look which I could never understand.

As we sat silent, absorbing the implications of her decision, I looked around at my friends, and concluded that they would be in favour of Kitty. I had no doubt I would have to return to Australia forthwith.

'Well, there must be some reason, and there's got to be an answer,' someone ventured. I knew that fresh insight can come if we really want it; and a sense of desperation made me willing to look.

As I thought, I suddenly saw how strong a drive there was in me to gain admiration for my acting prowess from the rest of the cast, particularly from Kitty. Unconscious of this, I had been using the character of Rankine with his explosive anger to try to get her to show appreciation. Not surprisingly, it had had the opposite effect. As I told the others what I had seen, I felt deeply sorry for the way I had treated Kitty.

Sitting there among the props, we all claimed healing and forgiveness. Later we had a hearty meal in a nearby restaurant. That night we played to a capacity audience, and the play took off like a rocket. Kitty commented that she never before had felt so comfortable in the part of Lil.

Fifteen years later, I found myself in a totally different play. *We are Tomorrow* is an allegory written by an English playwright, Peter Howard, which looked searchingly at the world as it was, and as it could be. It opens in a student's room at a party on the last night of the university year. He and his fellow students are discussing their dreams and ambitions. They are served by two shrewd college servants. One of them, Hope, is idealistic; the other, Memory, is cynical. Each compete for the students allegiance, and quarrel over whether wishful thinking or cynical experience will govern the world in the next generation.

The play ends by suggesting we need more than either Hope or Memory; we can change things for the better if, instead of simply paying lip-service to our ideals, we find the courage to put them into practice ourselves. That may sound fairly solid meat for an audience to chew on; but the characters were so human and humorous that the play was never indigestible.

My role was Memory. I found the part difficult, and immensely satisfying. Memory is both allegorical and earthy, and the transition between the two takes place frequently, linking the scenes together. It was a pleasure to play alongside Kaye Vertigan, at that time Vice-President of the Australian Rubber Workers' Union, who played Hope. Several university students set aside their studies to play the student roles.

We gave a run of shows in the Melbourne area. '*We are Tomorrow* was staged last night with verve, high spirits and a good deal of polish,' wrote the *Geelong Advertiser*. The reviewer wrote that Kaye and I played our roles with 'skill and a down-to-earth quality'.

In 1965 we decided to go further afield. Again I was granted unpaid leave from the tramways. We started in Hobart at the Theatre Royal, a beautiful old theatre with excellent acoustics. We were also in Brisbane; then gave a short season at the Genesian, Sydney's Catholic theatre. The Catholic Archbishop, Cardinal Gilroy, visited us backstage with his staff, having thoroughly enjoyed the performance. 'Tell me,' he asked those who acted the student roles, 'what is the secret of so much enthusiasm after a demanding day?' I can't remember what they said, but I do know that we all enjoyed presenting a play which, in such an attractive way, made people think about where they were going in life.

The most dramatic part of the tour was our visit to Mount Isa during the bitter industrial dispute there.

Mount Isa is an isolated town in the north-west of Queensland set among stark brown hills studded with spinifex, cactus, and stunted bushes. It exists because of its mine, which was producing seventy per cent of Australia's copper, as well as lead and zinc. At that time the mine had twenty-two levels and a hundred miles of tunneling, and employed workers from forty-one countries.

For months a major strike had been making national headlines almost daily, and had become a focus for the industrial, political and ideological issues of the time.

The strikers' spokesman was a flamboyant character called Pat Mackie. He had cauliflower ears, and usually wore a red baseball cap. His gravel voice and shrewd, wry, bitter comments on the TV news became much better known than any company spokesmen, who all seemed to be either super-respectable or anonymous. The full-page advertisements in which the company put their case were forbidding masses of solid type. It was like a match between an all-in wrestler and a gentleman in top hat and tails. And in fact, Mackie had been an all-in wrestler.

But the dispute was not only between workers and management. It was also between various unions and their members. The workers had been ordered back to work by the Industrial Court. The main union, the Australian Workers' Union, went along with this; but some unionists refused, and set up a Committee of Membership Control (CMC). They organised picket lines around the mines. The Government responded by flying in police reinforcements to protect those who wanted to go back to work. The division divided the town, splintering families, churches, schools, businesses and clubs.

One of our stage-crew, a New Zealand accountant called Peter Wood, believed that *We are Tomorrow* could help answer the bitterness in the town. When he put the idea to the rest of us, it seemed pretty far-fetched. How would we find the money to get there? Ticket sales wouldn't pay to take a company of thirty-five people to a town 1700 kilometres from Brisbane. But Peter was undaunted. Some of his savings had gone into shares in Mount Isa Mines, he told us, and he would sell them to start a fund to get the play there.

So we took him seriously, and decided to send two or three of our company to Mount Isa to discuss the idea. The Shire Council, the only body elected by all the people, gave us a warm welcome. We all put in what money we could, and others did too, and soon we were on our way. Several other trade unionists joined us, as did Alan Ramsay, who at that time was Vice-President of the Victorian Employers' Federation.

We soon saw for ourselves the atmosphere of fear in the town produced by threats and intimidation. A mine supervisor said, 'When the time comes to re-employ people, some of these blokes will only be given jobs on the surface. We don't want any so-called "accidents" down below.'

Rumours spread with remarkable speed. They lit up, then died like sparks, and added to the load of confusion and frustration that hung like smog over the town.

Some men were afraid to go into the public bars, or walk alone. One evening a couple of us talked with the AWU District Secretary, Kevin Costello, a powerfully built ex-cane cutter who had been sent up from Townsville to strengthen his union in the dispute. We sat in the house he had rented, and listened as he spoke in a quiet, reflective way which belied the tension he was under. 'I moved out of the hotel as soon as I could,' he said. 'It was too easy to get hemmed in there. Once I came out of my room into the corridor to find myself confronted by six men. It took all the courage I had to walk straight on through them.'

Most of us were billeted in private homes. I stayed with a sinewy young Dutchman who was part of the CMC. He produced a clandestine newsheet which the police were trying to trace. He rented a sparse little shack, and provided me with a plain but comfortable bed. Dutchy wasn't earning any money, but shared his simple breakfast with me. He seemed to trust me, and became interested in the idea of solving problems through an inner change in people.

One night, some folk singers arrived at the house from Brisbane. It was a hot night, and I had gone to bed. Lying there, I heard them come noisily into the kitchen and start discussing their strategy. A grey blanket hanging between my bedroom and the kitchen served as the door, and I heard most of the discussion. It was clear that their songs were calculated to stir the hate in the town. They talked till two or three in the morning, becoming increasingly incoherent as they sank more and more beer. I lay awake, worried that one of them would blunder into the bedroom and discover me. I knew they would be none too happy with what we were trying to do. To my relief, they finally went.

News travels fast in a place like Mount Isa, and within a day or two everyone had heard about the play. In his book, *Industrial Siege - the Mount Isa Dispute,* Gordon Sheldon writes light-heartedly that 'the youthful enthusiasm of the party was overwhelming as they visited company offices and the Labour Council headquarters.' Shops and hotels displayed posters. The Trades and Labour Council gave details, as did the Australian Workers Union. The *Mount Isa Mail* ran several features. The CMC passed a resolution urging their members to attend the play.

Some tried to turn the town against us. One barrel-chested miner said to me, 'Listen, you won't get fifty people to your show.' This did nothing for our confidence. But the opening night was packed, with the mine's General Manager and some of the strike leaders in the audience.

Anyone involved in theatre knows that if you fail to grip the audience in the first minutes, you are struggling for the rest of the night. It fell to me to grip them.

Memory introduces the play in the form of a prologue, coming from the wings in front of the curtain, talking and chuckling to himself. He catches sight of the audience, waves to them casually, and says 'H'lo, hello there.' I said this, and a slightly inebriated gentleman in the audience yelled back, 'Hello to you, mate.' We had a pleasant back and forth, the audience appreciating the dialogue with gales of laughter. I somehow wove it into the script, and went on. It couldn't have been written better. We were on our way.

The main switch-board was at the back of the hall. One of the stage crew was guarding it, as we had been warned that someone might wreck it. A police officer was also there, his car radio running, ready to be in touch with other police should trouble break out. After a few minutes he said, 'You've won your audience. I don't think you'll be needing us tonight.'

Many of the audience stayed on after the show, and we talked. A veteran of the town murmured to me, 'There are people here who I thought I'd never see together again.' A miner told me that he had been cut to the quick by Hope, who apologises to Memory for the way he'd tried to undermine him. 'I have to do something like that,' he said.

Such was the interest that at 48 hours' notice we decided to hold an open-air meeting. Six hundred came, and stayed two-and-a-half hours.

Then Pat Mackie asked his Disputes Committee to meet us. 'Are you giving the same attention to management as to us?' asked John McMahon, a Communist who had been the main negotiator. A roar of laughter greeted the answer: 'Yes, and we've found them every bit as difficult as you.' Then he asked, 'Is your challenge to management that they use the wealth of this country for the good of every last Australian?' We replied, 'That's much too small an objective. Australia's wealth is a gift of God, meant to be used to meet the needs of people everywhere.' They kept us three hours.

Later in the week Kevin had us round to his home. 'We have all made mistakes,' he told us. 'Now we must try to heal the wounds. I think *We Are Tomorrow* has done a lot towards this. You can walk down the street now without sneers being thrown at you. There are more smiles. I am going to try to build up morale, so that people will live together no matter what their political views.'

None of us can ever know what effect our visit had. But we believe it helped bring hope and fresh ideas into a sour situation. While we were still there, the members of the strike committee met, and received what Sheldon, in *Industrial Siege,* described as 'the biggest shock of the dispute: Mackie told them to go back to work, provided there was no victimisation.' It was the end of the strike.

There were two landmarks at Mount Isa. One was the mine's towering chimney stack; the other, on a hill, was a huge cross. As we left Isa by air, looking down on these structures, they symbolised for me two aspects of life that need to come together if production is to serve the needs of the world, and unions and management work together for the good of all.

In the following years I acted in and produced several plays. In 1978 Joyce and I went to India, where we took part in productions of *The Forgotten Factor* and *We are Tomorrow* which toured several cities, playing to large audiences. I had known poverty, but my experience paled as I walked through fetid slums, and picked my way between people sleeping on the footpaths of Bombay. I thought of Keir Hardie's struggle to end poverty in Britain. Today his passion is needed more than ever, in country after country.

So when, in 1985, I was asked to play a part in a dramatised story of Keir Hardie, I immediately accepted. It was called *The Man They Could Not Buy*, a title which delighted *The Sydney Morning Herald* when we put on a performance in the New South Wales Parliament House. At that time allegations of corruption were flying furiously around the Parliament, and the newspaper gleefully reported the performance on its front page.

That suited us fine, because we wanted to challenge the corruption - as did the Labor Members of Parliament who invited the play. But we wanted to do much more than that. We wanted people of every background to catch Hardie's vision of a wholly new society where 'each man and woman is free to develop the best of which they are capable... their powers, mental and physical, freely given in assisting those less fortunate.'

The play had been written by a Scot, Henry Macnicol. He had researched it carefully, and it brought to life the inner passion that drove Hardie on. 'Bitterness is like a baby's dummy,' says Hardie in the play. 'Ye can suck on it all day and never get fed. And bitterness degrades a man, aye, and enslaves him; and it doesn't cure what's wrong.'

Hardie had been freed from bitterness by his Christian experience; but his Christianity was far removed from that practiced by most of the church of his day. I played the part of a Presbyterian elder who visits Hardie at the request of Lord Overtoun, a prominent Christian. Overtoun owned a chemical factory which Hardie was attacking for its atrocious working conditions. When I appeal to him to stop attacking a fellow Christian, Hardie is blunt. 'It's not Lord Overtoun's Christianity I'm attacking,' he says. 'It's his lack of it. Where is the Christian conscience of the country? It ought to be the driving force of social revolution.'

His challenge applies just as much to our churches today, and some church leaders recognised it. 'You've got the right message there,' the late Archbishop Penman of Melbourne told one of our company, and used the video of the play with church groups.

But what surprised me was the response of the politicians. Over a third of the New South Wales Parliament came to the play. Members from both Government and Opposition were enthusiastic. One Liberal MP even sent a copy of the script to the State

Education Department, asking that it be put on the syllabus. Many, I realised, had gone into politics from genuine motives, which may have become tarnished, but Hardie's challenge and vision stirred them.

In Melbourne a Government Minister brought seventeen from his department. His wife came too. Talking with her after the play, she said that she well understood what Hardie meant when he tried to express what drove him on in political life: 'It's been one long struggle to keep up with my conscience, that thing inside me that urges me on when everything else is longing to lie down and rest.' I found myself gaining a new respect for the people who take on political leadership in our country. It has its perks, but it is a tough life.

Of course, trade unionists came in great numbers, and arranged performances so their mates could see it. We must have been the first play presented in Sydney's huge railway workshop complex at Chullora - described to us by a Labor Government Minister as 'little Stalingrad' because of the militant attitudes he had encountered there. Then on to Wollongong, where the General Manager of the steel plant was in the audience, along with miners and union officials. In Melbourne we put it on in the working-class suburb of Collingwood, and dozens of unionists and union officials came.

The Victorian Police Commissioner, Mick Miller, came too, and arranged for the Police Academy cadets to attend performances. 'We can train a cadet in police work,' he said, 'but it is harder to teach integrity.' The cadets brought a list of questions. One asked them to name the four attempts the play depicts when Hardie was offered an inducement to do what he knew he should not.

Hardie would have been delighted at the way the play reached Australians of such varied backgrounds, because that was his approach. He totally rejected the doctrine of class war. 'A movement having as its basis a determination to supplant one class with another,' he wrote, 'contains within itself the elements of its own destruction.... Selfishness is not the monopoly of the rich. The same causes which lead the rich landlord to raise rents operate just as freely with working men... Character is more important to a movement than doctrine.'

Hardie had a vision of a Christian society; and in presenting the play, we hoped to help make that vision reality.

16

A HOME IS WHAT YOU MAKE OF IT

Many threads have made up the pattern of my life. The strongest and most colourful has been the thread of family life. As an only child whose mother died when I was seven, who lived in the homes of relatives, whose wanderings took me rootless and homeless over a big continent, a wife and a family has been an immeasurable gift.

When Joyce and I married, it was a merging of opposites. She had two sisters and three brothers. They had little money, the manses they lived in were plain, the quality depending on the generosity of the local church committee. In those years a Methodist minister moved every three years. Yet there was security, the love of parents, the give and take of brothers and sisters. They created their fun together.

Hers had been a happy childhood. There were beaches to play on and the sea to splash and swim in; country walks, when mother would pack up lunches and send the children off for the day. In the manse garden, there was the delight of gathering fresh vegetables for the next meal; or picking a crisp lettuce, and making a meal of it by covering it in fresh cream. There were trees to climb and creeks to play in, particularly in one town where the creek ran along the back of the manse.

She had a lot to teach me about social graces. For years I'd roughed it, doing my own thing, often brushing people up the wrong way. In my first few months in Adelaide, I would sometimes be invited to stay in people's homes. My hosts would often say, 'Make yourself at home.' I took them literally, and when I did relax in my own style, they resented it keenly; some telling me in no uncertain terms what they thought of my manners.

At the start of our life together, Joyce and I rented a succession of homes. Our first was a little flat in the Adelaide suburb of Goodwood Park, owned by a lady as hard as nails about money. Our friends were upset when they learnt how much we were paying for such a poor flat. But we were happy, in the flush of our first year together. Then we rented half a house in the suburb of York. Soon after we moved, we read in the paper that a housing inspector had visited our Goodwood Park flat and described it, to our surprise, as a 'hell-hole'.

Later we graduated to a house in Millswood Estate. Just a couple of streets away, the fastest tram in Australia went belting down a protected ballast track to Glenelg, a favourite beach resort. Adelaide is famed for its stone and citrus fruit. And oh, the fruit trees we had in Millswood Estate! Luscious nectarine, varieties of peach, fig and apricot. Bantam hens clucked in the backyard.

The neighbours on either side didn't care much for the boys. We were a noisy crew and sometimes there were screams of rage and frustration. Noise is not necessarily naughtiness, but it can be terribly trying, particularly if the children don't belong to you. One neighbour was a milkman, whose round started in the early hours of the morning. Occasionally his day-time sleeps were disturbed. My motor bike didn't help. On the other side, the neighbours were fairly stiff and huffy in their attitude; a 'cut above' the rest, you might say.

A friend gave us a white rabbit which was more of a nuisance than a joy. It continually escaped from its hutch, either by accident or by one of the boy's designs. Joyce often chased it round the yard, under the trees and among the fowls. One memorable day it burrowed under the fence and came up in the middle of our superior neighbour's vegetable patch. It didn't help our relationship.

Six years went by. By 1946 we had four sons. Dennis was aged five, Peter was three, Brian was two, and Christopher was born that year. Friends and neighbours looked on us as a happily married couple. Yet there was an underlying strain, and cracks developed in our relationship. Our marriage was far from foundering on a reef, but we both felt uneasily that we were drifting in that direction.

There were many pressures. For months I had worked seven days a week without a break at GM-Holdens making aircraft parts. Like everyone else, I had done it gladly; the long lists of sons, fathers and husbands killed in action was a constant reminder of the price others were paying to keep the threat of invasion at bay. But on top of housing shortages and rationing at a time when I was responsible for a young family, life was not easy.

It was at this time that some of our MRA friends in Melbourne asked us to consider shifting there. Melbourne was Australia's industrial hub, and they wanted our help in developing programmes aimed at building creative labour-management relationships in the city's industries. We thought a lot about it, but could not see clearly whether or not we should go.

One weekend Joyce and I travelled to Geelong for a performance of *The Forgotten Factor.* That night we were standing on the footpath outside our boarding house discussing the proposed move with a friend, Gordon Wise, who had joined us on being demobbed from the RAAF. Suddenly he said, 'I don't think whether you move to Melbourne is the point; you two need unity.' Then he went on to talk of other things. That sentence was the key for us. Years later, I reminded him of the incident. 'I must have been a brash young man,' he remarked. Brash or not, it laid a firmer foundation for our marriage.

Next morning at half past five, we sat up in bed, and in silence put to paper the things that had made us critical of each other. I realised that in my mind I called Joyce a mule, who dug her heels in the moment I suggested a change of pace. If only Joyce would move as fast as me, I thought, how much more we would achieve.

These and other accusations surfaced that morning, and through it I had a clear, compelling thought, which I knew was the voice of God: 'I want you to take your hands off your wife, and live to make her the woman I want her to be, not the woman you want her to be.'

We breakfasted then walked down to the beach overlooking Corio Bay. Sitting on the sand, looking across the bay, Joyce told me about her poison bottle. It was labelled 'Resentments'. Whenever I ran roughshod over her feelings, she would uncork the bottle, shove in a resentment or two, seal it, then put it out of sight. Next time I hurt her, out would come the bottle, another good old hate, and another resentment added.

Watching the waves lapping and washing the beach, we too, asked to be washed. It was a new start. We decided never to let any criticisms between us take root, but bring them out to the light of day and deal with them. Shift to Melbourne? It almost seemed to solve itself. The answer was 'No'. Three years later, in 1949, we did move, and that was the right time.

For our first five years in Melbourne, we rented a big old bluestone house in the suburb of Moonee Ponds, on the northern side of the city. Our youngest son, Stephen, was born there. I worked as a tram conductor at the Essendon Depot.

By 1954 our elderly landlady had become a little unbalanced, and was pressing to come and live with us. With seven already in the house, this didn't seem reasonable. Nevertheless, her constant pressure brought to the surface a thought that had long teased our minds: why not buy a house of our own?

It seemed a crazy prospect. We had no money, and could see no prospect of windfalls or inheritances. I wasn't earning enough to make headway in saving for a deposit. Still the idea persisted; so we gathered a few friends and talked it out.

As we talked, and sought God's direction in a time of quiet listening, we felt Him urging us to launch out and buy. The south-eastern suburbs seemed the best place to look, and we decided on £2,500 as our maximum price; a modest but not unusual sum for a weatherboard house at that time.

So we set forth on this improbable adventure. Each day we searched the papers and, if a likely place was advertised, a friend in that area, Alice Clarke, would hop on her bike, pedal to the property, and phone us her opinion. Her husband Wilf was a carpenter, as I have mentioned earlier, and Alice had an eye for the right thing.

At that time Joyce's mother died suddenly and unexpectedly. She had been a widow for six years but was in good health. She lived in a modest house in Belair, a charming area in the Adelaide hills. Her estate was quickly dealt with by one of Joyce's brothers, a bank manager. Joyce's share came to £400.

A house came up for auction in the right area, and probably at the right price. We set off across the city in a borrowed car, our hopes high. The crowd was small, and the bidding proceeded. A man beside me whispered, 'There's only a couple of you bidding. I think you'll get it.' The figure went to £2,500. That was my ceiling bid, and I stuck to it. The man at my side urged, 'Another hundred pounds and it's yours.' The auctioneer raised his hammer expectantly, then finally knocked the house down to the other bidder. An anticlimax after our high hopes.

The months went by and I was browned off by the whole idea. One afternoon while I was drinking a cup of tea and preparing for my shift, Joyce was reading the paper. She remarked that there was a house advertised in Murrumbeena that might be worthwhile. 'Oh,' I answered, only half listening and went on with what I was doing.

Next morning after breakfast, Joyce told me Alice had pedalled around to the house, and thought it could be the one. It was for sale, not auction. We went and looked. There was a sweet feeling about it, and it could house the seven of us. The price was £2,500 and the deposit was £400, exactly Joyce's share of her mother's estate. We paid the deposit, which left us with nothing towards full payment in sixty days. A friend put me in touch with an official of a building society, who went to the house. Shortly afterwards in the mail came an offer of £1,800 mortgage. All we needed was £300 to bridge the final payment. We prayed for it. Without our asking, a number of people gave us money, and fourteen days before the final payment was due we had the total sum. We were in that house for thirty-five years.

We and the boys grew and learnt together; babies to boys; primary school to high, then out into the world on their first jobs. It was a tremendous adventure.

I well remember the numberless boot and shoe repairs I tackled; the pungent smell of old football boots as I ripped out old stops and hammered in new ones.

The broom cupboard was always full of cricket and baseball bats, and various sorts of balls. I caught and threw balls, hour after hour, on the side lawn. We had our fair share of broken windows, and I got used to repairing them; sometimes a new pane would last just twenty-four hours. And I mended innumerable bike punctures and straightened wheels.

A friend and I once made a billycart for the family. Peter paid a social call on a boy some streets away, riding the billycart. This enterprising young crook persuaded Peter to trade the cart for a load of old comics and a few rotten tennis balls. He also brought home a plague of fleas from the budding con-man, the fleas hopping madly all over the place. Joyce put him under the shower fully clothed.

All the boys except Stephen attended the old Ascot Vale Primary School. We have a collection of photographs of them in their various classes. Looking at them sets me wondering what makes a bunch of little boys look like a crop of potential crooks.

Peter was always independent-minded. When he was about ten, the class was set an English composition. Peter began writing from the bottom of the page, and line by line went upward. The teacher took a dim view of this method and demanded the reason for it. 'Well', said Pete, 'whoever thought of starting a building by putting the roof on first?'

Some time later Joyce went to the school for a teacher-parent interview. She was carrying Stephen, the baby, in her arms and by late afternoon when she saw Peter's teacher, was dead tired. He looked at her, screwed up his nose, and sniffed, 'What a peculiar child is Peter Cooney. Is his father a drunkard?'

A drunkard was an unusual accusation. But plenty of people assumed that a tram conductor would have fairly dull children. 'We can't understand it,' said a couple whose son went to school with ours. 'Your son is doing so well at school, and you are only a tram conductor. Our boy is not doing well and we are both teachers.' Some folk, whose children were enjoying the benefits of higher education, told us we were wrong to aspire to give our children a better education than we had had.

But Joyce and I were determined we would. My own lack of qualifications had always been a handicap, and we wanted our children to have the chance to evade that handicap.

Like all families, we have memories to chuckle over when we get together. Like Chris' statement to Joyce, one terribly hot day when Stephen was restless in his crib, and Joyce had put him in the bathroom, the coolest room in the house. In Chris' mind, the bathroom was the place where boys were put when they misbehaved. Fronting up to his mother, he told her sternly, 'It says in the Bible that when mothers borne babies, they shouldn't put them in the bathroom.'

Once Stephen and his mother were in the garden when a bee stung him, sending him hopping and yelling. Joyce was able to extract the sting, but he came out in huge welts all over his body. She told Chris to put Stephen under the shower, and try and soothe the pain with soap, while she rang the doctor. Suddenly Stephen began yelling blue murder. Putting down the phone and running to the bathroom, she discovered Chris scrubbing Stephen with Solvol, an abrasive soap. No doubt he had the best of intentions. The doctor prescribed a course of anti-histamines and all was well.

A walnut tree in the yard is mainly remembered because Dennis, who was swinging on the branches, called out to Brian, 'This is easy. You ought to come up and try it.' Brian climbed the tree, began to swing, fell and broke his elbow. On another occasion he was pretending to be an old man walking with a stick when the stick slipped and a sharp piece lodged in the back of his knee, requiring two operations to remove the pieces.

Brian and Chris slept in the same room and loved to wrestle. They would poke at each other as they lay in their beds. One night, when they were eleven and nine, their fun spilled over into serious business and in a fit of savage fighting crashed through the fibro-cement wall, leaving a gaping hole. There were dire results from their father.

On fine days we would often go on long walks to the local suburban parks - we had no car then. The walks broadened and strengthened my shoulders as I carried home tired little bodies no longer able to walk.

When the children were young much generosity came our way: school clothes in good condition; an occasional gift of money; the loan of a car for an outing; help when children were sick or a crisis developed; gifts bought for the children on special occasions.

Occasionally a vigorous exchange would disrupt the normal life of the home. When difficult situations arose, we tried to search for solutions, giving the boys ample opportunity to state their views. Certain rules were laid down for the running of the home, and if they were bucked, there was a well-understood penalty. We sometimes made the mistake of trying to apply these rules to spiritual truth. As the adage has it, 'You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.'

We tried to make meal times family times; whenever possible all would be seated before the meal began. Visitors who came to dinner often remarked on the naturalness and lack of embarrassment of the boys when talking with them. Recently one of the boys remembered those meal times as good times, because everyone was allowed their say, and had no fear of being squashed.

On several occasions, I wrote and produced short plays for the church; and most of the family played a part, one way or another. One was a series of musical sketches called 'What a Family'. It portrayed historical figures such as King David, St Francis of Assisi, John Wesley and Florence Nightingale. In one scene I developed an incident in the life of Francis which involved some of his friars. Stephen acted the part of a friar and played the guitar.

Coming home from rehearsal one night with his mother, he decided to walk home in his Franciscan robe and sandals. Joyce carried his guitar while he walked down the street, hands hidden in the folds of his sleeves. As they crossed the road by the railway section, under the dim street lights, a woman came towards them. She looked at Stephen, made the sign of the cross and moved on. He was quite disconcerted at having fooled the lady. 'God, I didn't really mean it,' he said. 'I was only pretending.'

The move to Murrumbeena had brought us closer to my father and Nellie, who by now lived in a nearby

Housing Commission estate. Visits to them became more frequent. Dad grew fond of Joyce, and began to include us in weddings and other family celebrations. The winds of change were blowing with increasing force through the Churches. When that good man Pope John XXIII spoke of non-Catholics no longer as heretics but as 'our separated brethren', the walls of sectarianism began to crumble.

This meant a lot to me. Though I was a member of the Methodist Church, which became the Uniting Church, the Catholic tradition has always been a source of strength to me. At times of stress, I have often gone into a Catholic church to pray. Our son Peter, as a young man, decided to become a Catholic, and our spiritual comradeship with him is as close as with any of our Uniting Church friends. Today I feel my faith has been enriched by the different strands of Christian experience which have made it up.

In 1974 Dad, aged eighty-eight, was admitted to the Alfred Hospital. One evening we were with him, and the ward was quiet. I didn't know how much his views had changed since our encounter, back in the thirties, when he had refused to pray with me. But a sudden compulsion came over me, that I should ask him to say the 'Our Father' with me. I told Joyce. A questioning look came into her eyes, but I knew it was right. I held his hands and said, 'Dad, let's say the "Our Father" together.' We did. A fortnight later he died in the hospice run by the Little Sisters of the Poor.

The time came when the boys quickly developed in body, vigour and independence, when their way of life became moulded by their high school and technical school environments. The house seemed to be always full of school and club friends. There would be motor bikes, a car, someone's boat trailer, push bikes, weight-lifting apparatus, football, cricket and baseball equipment; and books. They were involved in orchestral and theatrical presentations.

Amidst the enthusiasms and trauma of the teenage years, Joyce and I gradually receded into the background. There were parental heartaches over follies committed; the joy of seeing some youthful task achieved, the pain of seeing an opportunity deliberately rejected. Finally the umbilical cord of direct responsibility was cut. Dennis became an electrical engineer, Peter a public servant, Brian an accountant, Christopher a motor mechanic, and Stephen a professional musician.

Today the family stretches from Cairns in North Queensland through New South Wales and Victoria, and over to Ireland where Stephen is a well-known performer of Irish traditional music. Each of them has had plenty of ups and downs, and Joyce and I have rejoiced at their advances and grieved at their upsets. We now have daughters-in-law Annette, Ruth and Vickie; and grandchildren Victoria, Meaghan, Ashley, Matthew, Anthony and Sharon, all in their twenties.

We are proud of them all. We differ greatly in life-style and opinions on many subjects. But there is an underlying bond of love and loyalty which is very precious. A home is what you make of it.

17

ADVENTURE UNLIMITED

I've been over some tracks in my day;
West Australia, Cloncurry, round Hay.
In the light of the moon and the heat of the sun,
I've walked and I've walked till I've been nearly done.
But there's one thing brings comfort to me:
that's when I make a billy of tea.

It's the fair dinkum brew that I'm needing;
it's the stuff just to make me feel good.
It's the fair dinkum brew we're all needing,
to help us live just as we should.
As I build up the fire round my billy so black,
I think of the days that I've spent on the track,
but try as I might I can't turn the clock back,
so I turn to my fair dinkum brew.

O the gum trees are slender and tall,
and the wide open spaces still call.
Tho' the wind has an edge and down comes the rain,
there's a whisper which comes: 'Just begin life again'.
There's a track leading on that I see,
it's the one that's been destined for me.

I wrote that song long after my years on the track. Distance sheds a mellow light on the past, and softens the sharp, hard edges of experience.

For me this light reveals a rich mosaic: places, achievements, failures, shame and satisfaction. I have known beautiful dawns and glorious sunsets, travelled in the outback in dry, stinging heat; and enjoyed the soft, green English countryside. I have endured the cold of a European winter, and relaxed in the tropical breezes of Australia's northern coastal areas. I have marvelled at the grandeur of the Alpine ranges of New Zealand and Switzerland. I have picked my way through people sleeping on the streets of Bombay; and absorbed the magnificence of the Taj Mahal.

In the battle for survival, hunger and loneliness have been part of my lot. Time has not dimmed the memories of my experiences during the Depression, an unnecessary economic disaster that emptied the pockets and broke the spirits of millions across the world.

Places, and some treasured possessions, have brought enjoyment. But the greatest gift has been people; above all our family, but also a host of friends from many nations and cultures.

Often their gifts come unexpectedly. Five years ago I had a heart attack, and was in intensive care for some days. I cannot speak too highly of the meticulous care given me by the staff of the Alfred Hospital, Melbourne.

One night the sister, a Chinese Malaysian, came to check that all was well. Then a light sleeping pill, a smoothing of the sheets and bed covers; a check on the various attachments to my body. No fuss. Quiet, precise, confident movements. Fascinating to watch.

We chatted a little. For some reason I told her that I wasn't afraid to die. She was silent for a while, then asked, gently and tentatively, 'Do you believe....?' 'Oh, yes,' I rejoined, 'I believe in God.' This sparked a long conversation, from which one thought has stayed with me. 'From now on,' she said, 'treat every day as a gift from God.'

This I have tried to do; and it has given me a base for gratitude, stability and expectancy.

What of the future? I think of the problems the coming generation will face. I am painfully aware of the hurts of those who make up today's unemployment queues. They are better looked after materially than we were; but they face the same gnawing question, 'Am I just a useless person who nobody wants?'

That question is not easily answered, when they see computerisation replacing people in many industries. Will technological advance bring prosperity, or throw people's creativity onto the scrapheap and lead us into a nightmare, just as the Industrial Revolution in Britain became a nightmare for many of those caught up in it?

And that is only one problem. There are others which a few years ago were unimaginable, such as the tragic spread of AIDS, and the breakdown of family relationships on a huge scale.

The coming years will be a time of profound transition. All the hopes and dreams of youth will be needed to solve the problems, all their exuberance, their willingness to sacrifice for great ideals.

We have made it hard for them. They are confronted by a host of conflicting signals, pulling them this way and that. No wonder there is confusion. What can they hang onto?

One thing I have found a tremendous help is my growing conviction that history is not determined by economic forces or sociological laws, so much as by people's decisions. The greatest tragedies, and the greatest advances, are a result of the inner forces which motivate people. Throughout history, individuals have responded to a need, and their action has changed the course of events. Whatever happens to our society in the future, people will still shape it more than money or technology.

My experience has convinced me that there is a way out of the dregs of despair, the bogs of bitterness, and fear of the future. There is a unique purpose for every person, regardless of race, creed or culture; and those who pursue that purpose find the strength of character to grapple with the situations they confront. There are universal values which can show all of us how to set to work to cure the problems we face. To me, one of the best expressions of those values is the prayer of Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, may I bring love,
Where there is resentment, may I bring forgiveness,
Where there is discord, may I bring unity,
Where there is doubt, may I bring faith,
Where there is error, may I bring truth,
Where there is despair, may I bring happiness,
Where there is sadness, may I bring joy,
Where there is darkness, may I bring light.

O Master, grant that I may desire
Rather to console than to be consoled,
To understand than to be understood,
To love than to be loved.
Because it is in giving that we receive,
In forgiving that we obtain forgiveness,
In dying that we rise to eternal life.

As a dissolute, rich, young man in what is now Italy, Francis underwent a profound moral and spiritual change. This started a chain of events which affected his region and far beyond, as people discovered a better way of life than corruption and feuding. People who had been preoccupied with war discovered how to cooperate. They established hospitals, and later schools. Francis had taken them beyond the forms of their religion to the essence at its heart, and a social revolution was set in motion.

That is where I find hope that the challenges we face can be overcome. And that is a good note on which to conclude this story of an ordinary man, who discovered extraordinary flavours, sharp and sweet, in this endless adventure we call life.