

## Chapter XIII

In 1929, Marlborough House was one of the best private hotels in Perth where most of the people who came down from the country stayed. It was very central: by getting on a tram you were in the centre of town in a few moments. At that time, ladies were not allowed in bars and did not go into 'liquor' hotels. There was only one restaurant worthy of the name which sold wines with the meals, but the coffee was frightful and there was *no cheese board!* The Marlborough was a good residential hotel with all the luxuries of the day – cool, as many showers as you wished, and a laundry. The food was good too.

Edgar gave me a catalogue from Padbury's stores, asking me to make an order for us to take back with us – everything that we would need for three months. If I forgot anything, there would be *nowhere to get it*. He told me he had bought some pickled eggs. Butter we would buy if and when we went into Latham, or go without. There was no fresh milk, meat or vegetables. As soon as winter came, we would have a few laying fowls. As well as food, I must order soaps and all toilet requirements, writing paper, etc, ink, matches, cigarette makings and papers – four people, appetites unknown. The catalogue was in alphabetical order and the first thing was 'allspice'. I hadn't the vaguest idea what allspice was.

Edgar had told me that sugar and flour were bought by the bag (or sack) – 70lb and 150lb respectively. For the rest I began to plan meals for a day, then weeks, then for three months. The tinned meat, fruits and jams were bought by the case, although some jams, like plum, could be bought in large tins. Tea came in in 6lb tins. The dripping was frightfully hard mutton fat. Well, I made out my list and, miracle of miracles, I didn't forget anything.

We were going up in Alan's three-hundredweight Chev truck, which was the most popular motor arrangement in those days. As well as the stores, we had my two trunks of clothes, china, cutlery, linen, books, etc, a wood-burning oven, beds for us all, Wilky and Alan's personal things, some of their furniture, a full-sized iron bath and an old treadle sewing machine. We also took a goat along because Wilky was pregnant and we felt she needed milk.

I don't really think we were over-loaded but the old Chev had seen better days. By the time we had loaded everything on and collected the stores and packed them on, it was beginning to get dark as we climbed the then formidable Greenmount hill. After leaving Midland, there were very few houses and mostly bushland lay ahead. I don't know where it happened or what was wrong with the truck (I knew very little about engines in those days) but it broke down. Wilky picked up a rug and made for the bush at the roadside, saying she could be wakened when everything was fixed.

The men put chocks behind the wheels to stop the truck from rolling backwards; then they began poking around underneath. Two men appeared out of the night – one with a hurricane lamp and the other with, of all things, a comb of honey, which he thrust at me telling me to take care of it for him! I sat in the truck, holding the honey, listening to the grunting and swearing coming from under the car – such words I had never heard before! I was just fascinated by it all.

Some while later, they had fixed whatever it was: the man put in his hand and took his honey and, with his mate, just disappeared. They advised us to pull over as soon as there was space and stay until daylight to tackle the rest of the hill. By the next night, we hadn't cleared much more than a third of the 200 miles! We had various adventures with the load as well as the truck. The wicker chairs, at first, were within reach of the goat who thought she would have a meal off one, so we rearranged the load. I sat on the outside of the four of us in the front and it was my job to watch the load. Some miles later, I discovered we were a wicker chair short, so we turned round and drove back for a couple of miles. There was the chair – on the road, waiting for someone to sit on it.

Of course, at night, we slept out rough in our clothes. In the mornings, Wilky and I would wet our hankies from the waterbag and wipe around our eyes and mouth before putting our veils and hats back on. At night, we would take the goat off the truck and let her eat about the bush. One morning, the men had put her back and Wilky waved her hand in the air saying 'What a wonderful view'. When she brought her hand down, the goat had eaten half the soap! Looking back, I realize I could never have been very fond of the goat, because I didn't give her a name. Generally I name

everything, often inanimate objects such as tea trollies and bikes. To my horror, on the third day I discovered that the goat was missing. We turned back, wondering what we would find. Somehow, she must have decided that she would leap off, tethered as she was. A few miles back, we found her calmly nibbling trees by the roadside, the broken rope still round her neck. We couldn't find anything wrong and there wasn't a mark on her.

The weight of the load began to tell on the wheels – in those days the wheels had wooden spokes and these would shrink in the heat. If the weight was too much, the wheels just buckled up. (We would chock them up with damp rags.) Loaded like we were, the only thing to do was to take some off and send it up by rail when we got to a siding. After doing this, and fortifying ourselves with a good meal at a 'dining room', we thought we would travel all night until we reached Latham. Some time after sunset, two dingoes came running and barking beside the truck, only their green eyes shining. I was quite thrilled, trying to imagine I was in Russia and they were wolves. That was the only time I ever saw dingoes, although I often heard them.

We stopped at the wheat stack at Latham and slept until dawn. After calling at the store for mail and butter, etc, and to meet the store-keeper, Mr James and family, we went on to the Spencer farm, 'Overdene', where we were welcomed by Mary and Arthur. We had a real wash and breakfast, etc, then went on to Bunjil and eight miles south to our block.

The block was 5000 acres, three miles by two-and-a-half miles. It was in three strips, as it were; the centre strip was good, red soil, the outer strips sand-pale. Edgar was obliged to take the lot at that time. On the south of the block was a large salt lake formation. The north boundary touched one of Stratton's farms, the other boundaries were, or would be, roads.

Edgar had built a little shack of upright timber lined with bags and with an iron roof to house his seed wheat and 'super' as well as himself. There was only room for a table and chairs, so we camped round the shack, Wilky and Alan sleeping on one side and Edgar and I on the other. The front of the shack we used as a wash house.. Edgar had carted 100 gallons of water for drinking from the State well some 10 or 12 miles away. He also made us an open fire, or camp kitchen, to cook on. We would, of course, only boil or fry. Edgar had a mare called 'Dollie' and a two-wheeled light cart. Dollie had been his only companion and shared his water, etc.

The site of the house and the well were some quarter of a mile south. It was a pretty spot on the edge of what I called my park. The well was finished, but the water was totally unfit – for humans, washing (soap would not make a lather), the garden (it soured the soil) – nor could it be used in the tractor.

We began to build the house at once. First of all we needed uprights and rafters. Some miles away, Edgar knew where there was a forest mainly of gimlet trees. Gimlet grows beautifully straight and the branches don't grow thick. The bark is dark brown and smooth, but twisted like a gimlet. The wood is as hard as jarrah and you just *cannot* drive a nail into it. White ants are not very keen on it but, alas, they will eat it if they are hungry. We spent three or four days getting wood the right length, cutting off the branches and carting them to the block, then the holes had to be made – each six feet deep – and the ground was like cement. It was a good day's work if the men made one hole. In the meantime, Wilky and I painted each post with tar for nine feet so that three feet would be above the ground, covered with tar. (White ants will build up soil to reach wood if they can, but they won't touch tar or sump oil.

Edgar had saved a number of good wheat bags. These he carefully cut down the seams and then Wilky and I would pick out all the odd bits of twine. Taking two long strips of bagging, we would oversee them together, first straining the ends on a nail in a tree to make it taut. We also had to sew a small piece on the ends of the open bag to make it long enough. When sewn together these would be the walls. Once the uprights were in, the men would adze thinner poles for the rafters. We were in a hurry in case a summer storm came and if the roof was on, we would have some water in our two 2000-gallon tanks. We also wanted to fix the oven in so that we could have bread.

About half way between the house and the well stood the remains of a bough-shed Edgar had made when the well was being sunk. There were two single stretchers there and two old mattresses, and while we were building the house we would rest there at midday. The men would

get some well water and put it in the bath and before going back to the shack we would bathe. Like Grimms 'it wasn't for cleanliness we did it, but for coolness!' One week, Wilky went back early to do the tea because I had done the breakfast (next week it would be vice versa). One afternoon, I was happily splashing about in the bath when one of those quick, short, heavy showers sprang up. Grabbing the towels and my clothes, I jumped on to one bed and pulled the other mattress right over me. In five minutes it was all over and the men came to see how I had fared. They were surprised to find me in dry clothes.

Another afternoon, we noticed a redness in the sky and Rusty said we must hasten back to the shack because a strong dust storm was coming and would be followed by stronger winds and rain. When we got back, we found Wilky had put everything she could under shelter. I was told to fill any old tins with sand and Alan, who was the tallest, handed them up to Rusty to put on the roof to help keep it down. Then they dug a ditch around the shack to prevent it from becoming flooded. When we were at last battened inside, Rusty began making holes in a kero tin to make a brazier to cook a meal and Alan sliced boxwood thinly so that it would burn well. The late summer storm was not long and we were quite dry and safe in our little nest.

The goat was really a great pest and she gave us so little milk – only enough for Wilky, anyway. Of course, every tree we tied her to she just about ate it all. Once or twice she got loose and then really did have a field day around the shack. One day, I surprised her with a tube of toothpaste in her mouth; she spat out the tube and had a drink of water, so I imagined she had cleaned her teeth!

At last the roof was on and the stove set in: my first batch of bread was a great success but it was months before I really could be sure of always making good bread.

One day before Wilky went to Perth to have her baby, we two thought we would pay Mary Spencer a visit in the horse and cart. It was 12 miles from farmhouse to farmhouse. First we had to go uphill all the way to Bunjil Siding and then over the railway line to 'Overdene', the Spencers' farm. Mary's family, the Taylors, came out from England in 1909, that is 'Daddy' Taylor, his wife, sister-in-law and four children – Mary (8), Frank (7), George (nearly 6), and Kathleen (3). Taylor was a typical Victorian male and ruled his family like a real dictator. He came from a North of England middle-class family and was going to become a farming family in Western Australia. He took the old Midland railway line up north about 200 miles and then, hiring a covered wagon, took his family trekking some 50 miles due east to the rabbit-proof fence – he had taken up some 6000-odd acres of land just the other side of the fence. He was certain that in a few years' time the new Wongan Hills railway line would come within two miles of him. It did, but 16 miles due west! The land was good, rich, red soil but the rainfall was not as good as one could wish.

Those early days before the First World War were rough indeed. For four years they saw no other white woman. They all worked hard. The children, small as they were, helped build the 'mud' house. The first crop Taylor 'threw' by hand. They only had bush meat and, in the summer, dried vegetables which looked and tasted like hay, so Mary told me. When their shoes wore out they went barefooted. Their clothes lasted longer as they had brought many trunks with them. Mary didn't go to Perth until she was in her teens.

Their aunt taught them to read and write and do simple arithmetic. She had come out for six months to help her sister settle in this new country: she stayed for the rest of her life. Mrs Taylor was not in good health when they came and after some years of illness she died in 1913. To make matters less complicated, Taylor married his sister-in-law. (It was allowed in WA at that time but the law did not come into force in England until around the 20s, I think.) From then on, their aunt was known as 'Mummy', as their mother was always 'Mother' to them. Mummy made a wonderful little English 'old-world' garden around the mudhouse. In the 20s, when I knew her, she looked very like Queen Victoria whose codes and way of life she still upheld, making life rather difficult for the young people.

In the 20s Arthur Spencer (who farmed some 16 miles west between Latham and Bunjil), asked Taylor for Mary's hand in the true, old-fashioned way. In the late 30s Kathleen was married and left the district. The land was divided in half and the two sons established farms and houses of

their own. When Taylor died, Mummy moved in with Mary and Arthur and the old homestead crumbled away, leaving only the lonely grave of Mrs Taylor by the fence. The sons married and sold out and two large, rather soulless wheat farms stretch that side of the fence.

Arthur Spencer's father, a wonderful little man, came from England in 1874, in a sailing ship of course: it took a record time of 90 days to Melbourne. When he landed in his top hat and beard (his skin was so soft, he didn't shave), he was exactly 22. He had a letter of introduction to a family. He never forgot it because one of the sons sat on his top hat and he married one of the daughters: that was not for another ten years when he was 32 and she was 24. When there was the gold boom in WA they brought their family west because Pa's firm had gone broke and his bank failed. At that time they had three girls and three boys. Two of the girls were over school age. Pa left his wife and family in a rented house and went up to the gold fields. Ma and her two elder daughters kept the family by sewing men's shirts. They had all sorts of adventures, running dining-rooms in the hills, etc, and by the time the war came they had another two children. Arthur was the youngest. The three older sons went to the war, as did one of the sons-in-law. Pa took Arthur and his other two sons-in-law up to Caron and began establishing farms for his sons and sons-in-law when they returned from the war. Ma refused to come up until he had built her a house with a wooden floor and bought a cow for fresh milk, so she stayed with her daughters. She went off to work and it wasn't long before Pa got her the wooden floor and the cow! After the war he established Arthur on his farm, south nearer Bunjil, and he and Ma retired into their own little house on Arthur's farm.

It was through the Taylors that Rusty took up land at Bunjil. He went up to stay with them as they were old friends of his aunt and uncle who came out on the same ship with them. Arthur and Rusty were always great friends, although their experience of life was so different. I think what held them together was their interest and often concern for the world as a whole and what would happen to humanity. Also, they always helped each other in need and both played chess.

### ***Bunjil, West Australia, January 1929***

First visitors to Eōthen were, of course, men in that lonely part of the wheatbelt. In all the six years I was there, only nine women visited me. Early one afternoon, just as I was thinking of taking a short siesta, a man appeared at the door of the shack. I was chiefly concerned with how and where he had arrived rather than who and what he wanted. He was tall and thin, like a tea-tree; he wore the usual mixture that men do in the bush – oddly matching clothing – khaki or black shirts, etc, and yet they seemed to fascinate, these clothes, and they told a man's character more than all the outfitters' models ever could. It happened he was a well-sinker: in fact, he had sunk our well and he wanted to see 'the boss'.

Learning that he was at the site of the house near the well, he said he would walk down. I was absolutely fascinated. This lean, seemingly slow-moving well-sinker seemed the forerunner of a new and interesting life. Until then, the swift change and mode of life, the coping with cooking on the open fire and the daily round of duties, so old and yet so new and strange, had seemed to take all my thoughts. As I paused in the heat of the sunset and evening cooking, it was to sigh a little at the drab, brown, sun-scorched world, so flat and silent – no building in sight – no sound of life: the whole world seemed to cease to be. I had almost come to believe that there was no other world but this wild land, so strangely fascinating, so beautiful in its ugliness, so lonely – seemingly so still to a stranger until it lets you into its secrets. To me, the rest of the world I had known was for the time forgotten and there seemed no past. The future seemed lost, too. I was drugged with the present.

A long, lean man with his 'G'day Missus' had come from another world. Not a world I had known, but the world of the future – in this huge land that stretches from ocean to ocean and is called 'the bush' – where men respect women because they work hard and live to be respected, where men stood at a distance and called them 'Missus' – not because any social creed told them to do so, but because it was joy to their eyes to see a woman and hear her voice, because they knew that here was a little comfort. A cooked meal, real bread and cakes and tablecloths, cushions and things women always have about the place. Naturally, being newly wed, I worried about tea: would he stay? But of course, bush hospitality. I had no bread, only tinned meat, three hungry men and an

open bush fire.

Alas! What was I to do? Exactly what it was I scrambled together I can't remember, but finally the men leant back for a smoke and my husband gave me a proud smile from the end of the table – he knew as well as I did that this meal was to make or mar my name as a 'Missus' worthy of the name in the district.

In the meantime, I went to the back of the shack for a daily bath. This was a wash in a basin with well water. Some yards off, I noticed a tumbled-down two-seater piled high up with the worldly belongings of the lean stranger. At sundown, the men returned. Tea – sure! I sighed for the lack of bread. Our visitor remarked that a loaf of bread was a fair exchange for a decent meal and he would wake up his cobbler in the car. Imagine my state of mind when I found that I had bathed in front of a man in the car! Luckily he really was asleep, I discovered, so I was silent about the view he might have had. The shack was bright and cosy that night, with so many faces around the light. In the middle of the gossip, and after a smoke, our lean stranger disappeared for a few moments, returning with what looked exactly like a child's coffin. In reality, it proved to be a fiddle case of which he was very proud, having made it himself (someone had sat on the proper case and broken it). From this coffin he took out an old fiddle and, with a little coaxing from us, he played and sang all sorts of weird things.

Everything seemed topsy-turvy: the shack, the bags of seed wheat around us, the town lamp, the tablecloth and the dishes; the fiddler who was a well-sinker and, outside, the cruel white moonlight on the silent sand-plain and the hush of the bush.

In such a manner did we receive and were entertained by our first visitors at Eōthen.

### ***Bunjil Siding at night, 1929***

On dark autumn nights you cannot see anything a few feet ahead, not even the giant wheat stack now lost to the never-ending trucks journeying to and fro on the two thin snakes of railway lines, or the small, lonely shed waiting for stores from Perth. Over 1000ft above sea level, no trees near it, only low scrub and stony soil; not even a water-tank or lumper's shack.

On mail train nights twice a week, the train's light shines 20 miles away. In the shack huddle a few farmers waiting to post letters or collect goods off the train, or maybe even board it. Two or three sleepy lumpers long for their enforced guests to depart. Down comes another heavy, but brief, shower of rain splashing almost thunderously between the lines. Outside a dripping wet horse is tied to the fence and another between the shining wet shafts of a cart.

At last the train's light is really large and a whistle is heard. Hurricane lamp in hand, out dash the occupants of the shed, swinging the lamp high or the train will not stop. Someone runs to the horses who are trembling in every limb.

How high the monster seems! How futile the water-bags look swinging in this weather! What brightness and warmth within! The Perth Express! It seems a myth, or something beyond imagination. Perth! Streets, shops, trams, buses, people and *colours* – all colours: not glaring, sandy roads and dull brown scrub.

The guard takes the letters and the conductor heaves an old man up into the train. With a grunting and groaning and straining of wheels and brakes, the monster moves off slowly, sighing as he bursts into a sudden rush of effort to swallow up the two snaky tracks until he reaches the Mecca of civilisation!

The distant rumble comes up from the valley for a while and then silence, except for the dripping rain. Hurricane lamps move off and the sound of hoofs on the hard, wet road and one more shower; then the silence and stillness which only the bush knows, and in the stillness of the night a cold, white moon rises on a shining wet earth and the siding stands, a lonely sentinel, guarding the line – the link with the other world we call *progress*.

The night Alan took Wilky down to Perth was very like that, but it was the climax of an adventurous day. For some reason, Rusty and I had gone to Latham in Alan's truck and, on the way, about two miles from home, the truck had broken down and we decided it was best to walk home and let Alan look at the truck on his way to the siding. When we got home, Alan was having a bath

prior to putting on his Perth clothes and time was pressing if they were to catch the twice-weekly train. Rusty got the cart ready. It was intended they went up in the truck – the cart would take longer and Rusty was terrified Wilky would miss the train and perhaps have her baby before the next one. The pull up the hill to Bunjil was a bit of a nightmare – four of us in the small cart and a rather old harness. We dropped Alan off at the truck and went slowly onwards. Soon we could see the light of the train – one could often see the light 20 or 30 miles away. Somehow Alan arrived at the siding the same time as us, just before the train came in. I took the cart home and Rusty the truck; only then did we realize we had had nothing to eat for hours.

While Wilky was away and Alan still with us, I had one adventure which I loved remembering. It was one morning when seeding was in full swing. Arthur Spencer had lent us eight of his team horses. Rusty was using four at a time in the drill, resting the others. The men took it in turns to drive the drill and take the cart to fill up with seed and super, which was stored in the shack.

I had just put a batch of small cakes in the oven when I heard Dollie whinny and a scramble of hoofs at the horse yard. I ran over to find that the gate had not been shut properly and the horses were off across the scrub. Dollie, saddled, was tied to a tree. I ran back to the house and, after taking my cakes out of the oven, then ran back to Dollie and, jumping on her, headed after them as they were going past the shack on their way back to Overdene.

The horse, Nugget, was in the cart outside the shack. Rusty was inside. He heard Nugget whinny, came out and saw me on Dollie. He ran towards me and, taking my place, was just turning to dash after the horses disappearing over the sand-plain when Dollie's bridle snapped off. We hastily changed over with Nugget's (these sorts of things never happen in movies at the critical moment!) Rusty told me afterwards that both he and Dollie loved the chase and he was able to head them off back within a couple of miles. By that time I had fixed the bridle, driven the cart back to the house, and put my cakes back in the oven – wonder of wonders, they didn't seem any the worse. My day had been made: I always seem to thrive on those sorts of adventures.

Rusty was friendly with one of Arthur's sisters and her family at Caron. The first harvest I was there, the Griffiths had no tractor that would work and we had no harvester, so it was arranged that one of the sons, John, a big boy for his 14 years, should come over and help us harvest. Then we would go over and help them. The first week John was with us, he was absolutely fascinated by us both, our discussions together on all kinds of subjects, and our books. I was equally fascinated by this cheery, intelligent boy who had lived all his life in the wheatbelt. He said he was going home for the night on Saturday as there was a dance in Caron – he suggested we came too. We thought we would; it was the first social affair I had been to in the district.

Rusty was a very good dancer and it was always a delight to dance with him. To my surprise, this large 14-year-old John was also a very good dancer. I found out they were a musical family. At these dances, the whole family went – when the children grew tired, they went to sleep in the cars or trucks. The babies were passed from female to female as each got up to dance. The ladies brought a plate of food and the men paid a few shillings which bought the tea, etc.

At Caron the music was supplied by one of the three station-masters and his wife – she played the piano and he the fiddle. When they wanted a rest, John's father played a barn dance on his accordion. We did Lancers, Alberts, waltzes, foxtrots – the lot. The ladies wore evening gowns, the men grey flannels, white shirts and a tie!