

Chapter XV

Extracts from letters written to the family in England and saved by my mother

January 1929

The sun will set in another two minutes. I am sitting over the camp fire trying to keep my legs warm. It has been a windy English summer day today: rain threatened to come and the men scrambled the beds into the tent. But it didn't. I will be able to see the boys coming home soon. There is a 'bush' soup waiting for them with dumplings and all!... We haven't eaten bread for a fortnight. We can't make any because both Rusty's camp ovens are useless. In fact, Wilky and I use one as the 'Houses of Parliament'! We sit over it on an old camp stool with a hole cut in it!!

So we make a kind of fried bread or fritters. When the winds or the willy-willies are too bad for frying, we boil plum puddings. Luckily we have a good supply of onions and potatoes and, of course, tinned food and flour. But your ideas run out a bit when you can only fry or boil. We hope to be able to get some bread from the siding (Latham) about Saturday; anyway, by then the stove should be set in the house so that we can bake some. Ma Spencer sold us four old hens and they all laid today! Also we have a silly young rooster who can't crow properly yet. The goat is as stupid as ever – if she gets a chance she *will* eat soap! Here come the boys trudging home.

After tea We all enjoyed the dumplings, Rusty particularly. Alan tried to shut the door by pulling wheat bags across the shack doorway! He said he felt cold... so much happens every day, I can't tell you half. OH! There are queer, high anthills here, some nearly as tall as I am. In the day, the flies are vile, but the nights are cool and insectless.

February 1929

Look dears. I am only going to write every other week. I'll promise to try and make them fat ones, given enough time. At present, we are frightfully busy trying to get the house up before it rains, so that the men can get on with ploughing and the rain can fill the tanks from the roof... Rusty and Alan have had an awful time trying to get the poles 'jake', as they call it. We are, of course, using bush timber. Gimlet. Not from our block; we have no tall trees large enough for building a house. We have some York gums, but mostly tea-trees, and on the sand plain scrub, hard and often prickly, like gorse... To clear the tea-tree, it is 'rolled', that is, knocked over by an old engine boiler pulled by a tractor and then it is burnt in the season. The shrubs are just ploughed in and then raked off into heaps and burnt.

Wilky and I usually go down to the well and the site of the house just before lunch, taking enough food with us for us all. Then we set to work, Wilky cutting up kero tins and boxes for shelves in the kitchen and me cutting wheat bags open for the walls. This week, it is my turn to come home early to cook tea. I've seen several kangaroos about and wild turkeys (really bustards). Two guanans live around the shack: we call them Bubble and Squeak. Bubble is a darling, he is about two foot long (a bobtail) with a wide flat body, heart-shaped head and sleepy eyes. He isn't a bit scared of us, even if we disturb his rest. The first time I saw him, he was shedding his old skin – he seemed just to walk slowly and casually out of it. Squeak is long-tailed, over four feet, thin and pointed at both ends like a snake with four legs. He is quick and energetic and doesn't like us. We haven't seen him since he sucked the neck off one of the chickens and woe betide him when we do!

July 1929 (to David, aged 11)

I'm writing this in my park – nearly 20 acres of it – ask Dad how big that would look. You could easily get lost in it, but not for long because you could hear the roosters crowing. Anyway, it faces north and south and the house is in the south-west corner.

One day, Rusty and I were going to Latham in the cart, which meant we would go the shorter way across the salt lakes. It was not long after the winter rains. We were going along Rusty's old track when we reached the boundary. We found that our neighbour had at last put his fence up where it met our boundary at the corner. We went along the fence for about a mile until it finished and then turned to go along what was marked on the map as a road. It went through about

six salt lakes, some of them not even passable in the summer, so there was nothing for it but to keep going around them. This was very weary work, especially for Dollie pulling the cart.

Then came two lakes side by side, with a small gap between; the sand between was greenish looking, but didn't look any worse than a great deal we had come through. Rusty turned Dollie's head to go between the lakes and the next minute the cart was in the mud up to its axle and up to poor Dollie's tummy. Grabbing my handbag, I jumped out behind the cart on to firmer soil and ran for hard land. Rusty went to Dollie's head and tried to turn her, but she couldn't move the cart. Something made me turn and there, riding swiftly towards us, was a tall, thin black knight on a snow-white horse, with three dogs jumping and barking around. (I call him a knight because he is one of the greatest gentlemen I have ever met and he came to our rescue: black because his skin *is* black – he is a 'blackfellow'.)

As he leapt from his horse and quickly tied it to a bit of scrub, he was laughing and shouting instructions, worrying that Rusty would get his clothes muddy. They unharnessed Dollie from the cart and, with great difficulty, got her to firm land. I was coaxing her with soothing words as she was terrified and trembling all over. Some horses lose their heads with fright and just die. As I led Dollie near the white horse for company, I found that the saddle cloth was made of a wheat bag and pockets were sewn into it, with all kinds of weird things in the pockets – I couldn't stop to see properly as the men needed help. They managed to turn the cart so that the shafts were facing the firm land and I was told to hold these while one man each side turned the wheels, spoke by spoke, until we got the cart out. All the time, our helper was chatting and smiling away so that the horrid adventure was almost turned into a game. When Rusty offered payment, he laughingly refused, saying 'You today, me tomorrow'.

Out of one of the saddle-bag pockets he offered Rusty some wine which Rusty declined, *but* Rusty did shake hands with him when he thanked him again – which greatly pleased him – and as he rode away, he took off his hat to me, which is seldom done here. As we went on our way around the lakes Rusty remarked that not only was he a true white man and a gentleman, but he could teach many men a lesson in neighbourliness and kindness.

Some time before, Alan and I had been bogged in his truck, but that's not like a horse....

October 1929 (another one to David)

Phew! It is hot today and the flies are a real bother, and now Dinkie has walked over this page. I'm sitting on the verandah, the coolest place at the moment, fanning away the flies with one hand.

About a week ago, on a Sunday, Rusty and I set off in the cart to visit a Dutchman and his mother (who had come to stay a while with him) on the other side of the railway line at Bunjil. We had promised to go for lunch and had left it rather late. On what is known as Lebe's Road, a stretch of some two miles between fenced property, we saw two kangaroos. We knew the fence was unbroken and there was no escape. Remembering we had the gun, Rusty whipped Dollie into a gallop. Dollie, for all her age, began racing away and I grabbed the gun to load it for Rusty. She went fast, but the kangaroos went faster. The cart was swaying up and down like a switchback but *did* those kangaroos hop! Pa kangaroo hopped across the road to see if there was any break in the fence, but soon returned to his wife. By now, Rusty had the gun and I was driving; we were also going uphill so Dollie could not keep up the pace. There were some tall bushes and the kangaroos rested behind these until we caught them up, then bounded away with fresh energy – we realized we would never catch them in a cart. Mother kangaroo was beginning to tire and we guessed she had a joey in her pouch. We realized she couldn't last much longer at that pace but we knew that the fence suddenly went at right angles and they would be free. We had lost all interest in killing, but just enjoyed the chase, as Dollie did. Suddenly, Pa went round the corner in one great bound, with Mother close behind. So our chase ended and we rode respectably to our lunch date.

I must away and water the garden and cut Rusty's hair – siding day tomorrow.

Extracts from letters written between 1929 and 1932

The other Sunday, Rusty took me 'double dinky' on Dollie over the sand plain to the south of our

block, to our beautiful salt lakes. They are dry this time of the year, of course, but beautiful in their dryness as their surface shines a grey-green-tinged whiteness. I am longing to see what they look like in the winter. We began with me in front in the saddle, but Rusty had no control of the horse that way, so we dismounted. Then Rusty mounted and tried to get Dollie near an anthill for me to mount. She wasn't fond of this idea but, when she came near enough, I put one foot on top of Rusty's in the stirrup and, clinging to her mane with one hand and Rusty with the other, I gave a leap and Rusty a grab as Dollie tore off. When she calmed down I got settled straight and we were away.

It was a glorious ride, the autumn wind blowing through us keeping us cool. As we approached the lakes, hundreds of small pieces of pink marble were lying about as though they had been scattered by a giant, just for fun. They did look pretty. On one side of the lakes are rock formations as though waves have washed them for years. There is a small cave and a *fresh* waterhole in the rock. Whether it was formed hundreds of years ago, or the aborigines made it, I do not know. On the surface of the largest lake are weird large Vs formed with stones, as though children once played some unusual game.

[Years later I discovered from a book I was reading that those Vs meant that aborigines had held tribal gatherings there. When one remembers the waterhole which always had fresh water,, with a stone hiding its entrance, this must surely have been so.]...

In the winter, tall, sticky sundews rising from their rosette of leaves used to sparkle among the pink marble, making it a real fairyland...

Being winter and cool, I am taking the afternoon off in the paddock with the men, or rather they are burning out the stumps and knocking down anthills: I've been just poking one or two stumps and lighting them for fun. It's fun when you can stop if you are tired. Of course, I fell down a rabbit hole and messed up my clean stockings...

It was *funny* coming along. I was sitting in a chair, well balanced in the cart; Rusty was standing driving with Tom beside him, clutching with great care our only bottle of ink, in case my pen ran dry. We were all busy with our own thoughts, mine on the beauty of the winter scene. The cart gave an extra jerk and there was a kind of snapping noise. Rusty remarked, in a quiet, deadpan voice, 'There goes Tom!' He pulled up and we looked back – there was Tom's huge body standing perfectly upright, facing the wrong way, still holding the bottle of ink. When he turned round, the amazement on his face was beyond description. We just roared and roared with laughter. It all happened so quickly and we have no idea why he was *standing* facing the *wrong* way...

Just a short tale about a long-tail 'guana'. They are like snakes, about six feet long, with four lizard-like legs and they can move very fast. Two have been stealing the eggs and the men have not been able to shoot them. The other morning, I was busy in the kitchen and Pussy was just coming dreamily in through the back door when she suddenly gave a dart to one side. I grabbed a stick and went out to see. A yellowish-green tail flashed towards a tree and the next second Pussy was up the tree too. It was the smaller long-tail. Pussy lost interest and came down. I wondered how I could keep it up the tree until the men came home at lunch-time – I couldn't stand there all morning. I couldn't shoot it with the rifle – I needed a special sight. (I am right-handed but left-eyed.) So I got Judy, the kangaroo dog (she is little more than a pup) and tied her to the tree. Every now and again I went out to make her whine so that the long-tail would be too afraid to move. After two hours, the men came home. I took Judy away and Rusty shot the long-tail to pieces and that was the end of him – but not quite: Pussy brought a piece in to show her kittens that they should not eat him!...

A 'dinkie-di' sandstorm is raging. When it sprang up I began to hustle, because when it stops, usually rain comes next – heavy rain! With giant strength – for me – I took the double mattress, clothes and pillows from the bed on the verandah, all in one go. Next I gathered dry twigs to light the fire in the morning and saw that all the spare wood was well covered.

I knew the truck in the shed was fairly safe from the wind and rain. The harvester I could do nothing about – I had only enough covering for the tractor. Imagine me, standing on *top* of the tractor, pulling for dear life, with the sandstorm all round threatening to blow me off. Back I ran to the house, with the air so full of sand and smoke from distant fires I could only just see the house. Next I dismantled the 'sanctuary' on the front verandah, which looked as though it had not been

swept for a month! After battening down the bedroom door, I put the potatoes on to cook ready for when the men returned. About ten days ago we had one nearly as bad and not a spot of rain...

On Tuesday the storm came just after lunch. Hail and rain, Tom ran about catching the hail and putting it in his mouth to cool him! We all put on bathers and ran and skipped about in the rain, like drunken lambs! I collapsed with laughter at Rusty – he would go through all the antics of a young lass chasing Tom and then run away, looking silly. Then those two played leap-frog and, Tom being so much bigger than him, Rusty would pretend to blow up his muscles to get enough strength to leap over Tom. Then he would end by sliding the whole length of the house in the mud. It all sounds rather silly, but it was *so* wonderful to be cool and wet, after days of heat and sand. Harvest was held up that day, of course, and next morning the steam from the ground was like a great mist...

Do you remember those very hot days in Cottesloe when we would lie in the doorway to try to keep cool? Well, today is like that. Yesterday was the usual summer heat, which changed suddenly in a few hours to humid, thundery weather, and everything began to go bad. I made some powdered milk up at noon – by 4pm it was curdled. At 5pm I rescued the meat. The dripping refused to go even white, much less hard.

By bedtime, it was cruel and, when we lay on the bed, it was dreadful...and heaven was a cool bed and no sunrise! Then a violent wind blew up and two spots of rain. Rusty jumped up and, putting my long mac on over his pyjamas, ran a quarter of a mile to cover the tractor up. Nothing happened! All night we lay awake or dreamed wearily. Long before 4am was dawn and the flies were worrying us. At 5am the bees were swarming around the water-bags and an early magpie raced the sun and was first at the bird-bath. I got up and had a cold bath, the men followed suit.

It was hot enough to strip (harvest) at 7am (the normal time is 10.30am). A slight hot wind is blowing now; it is better than nothing. I long to lie and sleep, but it's too hot and I'd feel sick, so I'm writing this instead, to try to keep awake. Don't expect too much of a letter because, for the second day, a thunderstorm is overhead, a close stuffy one, which takes hours to come while we ooze with sweat and get stuck all over with flies. Poor Rusty and Tom are going for their lives until the rain does come. Tom is on a harrow (Dollie is pulling) filled with burning twigs over the sand plain, burning off bush, while Rusty is rolling the taller scrub with the tractor.

Another chook died with the heat yesterday. We had such a downpour of rain yesterday afternoon and Tom and I got soaked covering things up, so sudden and heavy was it. Rusty came crawling home through the 'park' like a drowned rat. By the look of the sky, they'll come home today about 5pm.

It was Tom's birthday on Sunday – he is a month older than me. He calls me 'The Little Missus'! We gave him a pair of tennis shoes to wear in the evenings. I made some iced cakes as he has a sweet tooth and we had fruit salad (tinned of course) for a treat. Being the coolest day for six months, we walked to the salt lakes, Tom carrying the gun – it's his ambition to shoot something. We were all hungry by the time we got home... We have some fresh meat most weeks now...

The storm is coming near now and outside the whole air is choked full of sand and is slowly surrounding us. I have shut everything I can and now this writing pad is sandy. You would think that fires were near to look at the sky. Luckily I have Barrie for a pal – he is curled up as small as he can make himself on the verandah. Both men will be foolish if they don't start walking home. It will be a worse storm than yesterday. I love a good storm and the house seems fairly firm. Here it comes – hail, no rain. I think I'll light the fire and get the men's dry clothes ready.

Next day – another thunderstorm. Not so hot, but the flies just as sticky. Not much rain yesterday, just one heavy shower. Tom came home wet but Rusty said he covered himself in the tractor cover and declared he was bone dry. But I saw him taking quinine before he went to bed...

Thursday evening – pouring cats and dogs

Rusty and Tom sang 'Oh! Showers of Blessing! And 'Just Like Darby and Joan' at the tops of their voices while they washed up. Then they teased Barrie by playing the mouth organ and scared Dinkie up into the roof. He is trying not to fall asleep up there because then he will fall off.

Rusty is making himself a lemon drink before settling down to read, although, of course, he should write his mother a letter. Tom is busy trying to scratch out one of his few letters: all in our small kitchen because it's the warmest place. On a line over the stove hang all their wet clothes and the rain is loudly pitter-pattering on the roof and trickling into the tanks. Barrie is now tucked up in sugar bags on the verandah so, the coast being clear, Dinkie has come down and is warming my chair by the fire. On washing day, I found that Dollie had walked into the post that holds the clothes line and, as soon as I had a line full of clothes, they all fell into the sand and needed rinsing again. Such is life...

I had never seen Saleeba before and when he appeared at the door I was fascinated: I could not place him in the life here at all. To me, he should have been a humorous monk in flowing robes, floating around Bethlehem. When he took off his hat and I saw a little thin patch in his hair, just in the right place for a monk, I felt ready to laugh. He is slightly taller than I am, with jet black hair and dark brown eyes full of soft humour behind glasses. His manners were perfect and, although he was dark, one did not feel that he was coloured, or Eurasian. He was well educated with a quiet, 'olde worlde' air. I later discovered he was pure Assyrian...

On the way to Perth, Saleeba took us to see a farm his father had just bought for his younger brother. Saleeba took us over the old stone house; it was 75 years old – the stones were from the hillside. It was thick and solid and the walls that looked over the valley had slits in them so that any attackers could be shot. The doors and windows, low and small, looked as though they had been painted with a bluebag. The garden was quite something. There was a vine over 50 years old and creepers of all kinds, even rose trees. In queer places among what was now a vegetable patch were such things as arum lilies, bits of wallflowers and numbers of other English flowers that must have taken years of care to get them to establish themselves. I simply cannot describe this garden, but the wonderful spirit of the dear old lady who had lived so much of her life there surely came over me. There is something so wonderful about a garden, when its spirit shines through the years and a mass of weeds and vegetables...

At Perenjori the other day, we found a man had raced *fresh* fish from the coast. Of course, we bought some and had a wonderful feast. I was not really surprised when the cats would not look at it – they have only tasted tinned fish...

1 October 1930

Where shall I begin, such a lot has happened. Hazy (Elsie Haze) departed yesterday – we took her as far as Perenjori. On Friday, we arrived just in nice time to meet the train: I took Hazy to the dining room for breakfast. It was rather a hot day and Hazy was glad to rest in our 'Sanctuary' in the afternoon. I didn't let her get up very early next day, but, even so, it was too hot to go anywhere outside. Sunday was a little cooler and we went to the salt lakes. The men hunted ducks – without any luck – while we explored and Hazy took snaps. On Monday, I took her to see our huge anthill – over nine feet high – and she took a snap of that.

On Tuesday, we had to rise very early and Hazy stood in the cold to watch the dawn over the sand plain. Of course, it wasn't half as beautiful as it sometimes is.

We arrived in Perenjori just before 9am and the town was just waking up, when a plane flew over! To our surprise, it flew round and round as though it was trying to land. Each time it came lower and lower, its bluebottle body becoming plainer and plainer. We felt sure it would not try to land on the road with all the wires in the way. The hotel had just opened its bar door and put the white cocky in his cage on the end of the path. Nearby is an extra large space of road and it was here the plane now made for. Dipping low, a hand came out and threw something which fell at the publican's feet as he came out to see what the noise was. He picked up what proved to be the morning's paper! The plane made one more circle around and the hand came out and waved as the plane went off in to the sky again. It appeared that one of the farmers in the district had just bought a blue moth and this was his first flight from Perth. He had brought the day's paper which he had bought in Perth *two* hours before. In a few minutes' time, the train from Perth – which had taken *twelve* hours – will arrive with *yesterday's* paper!!

Just before the plane arrived and before the publican had time to put the cocky outside, three railway officials trooped over, entered the hotel and were not inside three minutes when back they marched, after their first drink of the day. As Rusty said – it didn't touch their sides. What a waste of money!

I was afraid the trip by truck to Perenjori might have been too much for Hazy, but she enjoyed it and, of course, that time in the morning it was not too hot. We were able to have a cup of tea before the train came in and the journey up to the Wrays would not take long. It was a change having someone to talk to in the daytime!...

January

Smut is sitting on my lap, or rather lying upside down, having fallen asleep in the middle of playing with my hand. Tiddles is washing herself prior to sleeping. Yesterday, Tom brought home a snake, about four feet long, that he had killed. He showed it to Puss, the mother cat, who is a great snake killer. Her tail and back began to bristle and she kept patting it to see if it was really dead. Tom made the snake jerk and Puss shot quite two feet into the air. The men then took it to show to Judy: she was in such a hurry to run away, she shot the length of her chain and nearly strangled herself.

The other day, when Rusty was carting wheat with Judy on the back, he surprised a young kangaroo. Rusty was travelling at 35 miles an hour (the best speed on corrugated roads) but the kangaroo was going faster. When he began to tire, Rusty put Judy off the truck and she gave chase. She passed the kangaroo and headed it back towards Rusty. The animal, seeing Rusty, made one last effort to get through the fence, but Judy tripped him and Rusty caught him and tied his legs together with his hanky. (Rusty has a large supply of khaki hankies that he seemed to use for everything except his nose.) Then, putting him in the front of the truck with Judy in the back, he went up to Bunjil. As Rusty stopped the truck, with one desperate jerk, the kangaroo freed its front legs and, jumping out of the truck, bounded away among the wheat stacks and along the railway line, with Rusty's hanky and all. Away shot Judy, with Rusty streaking behind, all the farmers and lumpers laughing and cheering them on. Once more, Judy caught him and threw him again, this time he hit his head on a sleeper and was stunned. So once more Rusty caught him. All the men made a great fuss of Judy and said she would be a good dog when fully grown. She always rode on the very top of the wheat; the lumpers could see her for some distance and it looked as though she was sailing along the tops of the bushes!

February 1931

All men are now mad on looking for gold in this part of the world, so on Sunday – a stinking hot day – the men *would* pack up in the cart to go down to the salt lakes to look for gold!! (Now, in the winter, when all the shore is green and beautiful with flowers and the sundews sparkling among the pink marble, I can't drag them down there!) So, armed with digging gear, water-bag, some paddock cake and books for when they grow tired of digging, and the gun, we set off.

Judy went off exploring, delighted at having something fresh to do. We were discussing wheat and crops, etc, as we trudged slowly across the stubble and had nearly reached the scrub track to the salt lakes when Tom suddenly saw Judy, gaily jumping around a huge kangaroo. In a few seconds, Tom had tumbled himself and the gun out of the cart, with Rusty behind him, leaving me to look after Dollie and the cart. Now Tom could easily get excited with it all, so I shouted after Rusty to call Judy off in case he shot *her*. Then my attention was called away by Dollie who had seen the gun and was in a nervous state.

To my amazement, the kangaroo did not move when the men closed in on him. I did not know then that he was a very old, wise fellow and he knew that if he ran, Judy would trip him up. With his back to a tree neither she nor any man would come near him for he would tear them with his front paws. Then he saw the gun and decided to risk it. When he found that Judy was only young and could not keep up with him, he began to take those long leaps which they can do on sand plain and which cover a great deal of distance with each leap. Judy followed, and so did Tom and Rusty – they did look funny, streaking across the country! Dollie and I plodded on more slowly.

The sand plain began to give way to scrub with small trees and the kangaroo could not go so fast. He hid behind a sapling but, with Judy on his heels, the men soon found him. I saw the gun change hands and heard Rusty call Judy to him; then a shot! By the time I looked again (as the shot had scared Dollie) the kangaroo was down and Tom was running towards me. It appeared that when Rusty called Judy, she ducked back again and one of the shots had gone through a bit of flesh under her tummy. Tom poured some water from the bag into his hat and took her a drink. She was delighted at the fuss they made of her and didn't seem even to notice the shot. When I reached them with the cart, Judy was happily drinking the water, the dead kangaroo lying near by – shot through the heart. He was so heavy, the men had difficulty getting him up into the cart.

We didn't spend long at the salt lakes; the men soon got tired of looking for gold and, anyway, they were anxious to get back to skin and fix the kangaroo. The return journey would be slow because of the weight of the kangaroo in the cart...

May

Yesterday, just after 1pm, I left here in the cart to see if our stores had arrived at Bunjil. Rusty was rather scared about letting me go because there are no steps and I would need to climb over the wheel to get up into the cart. He made me practise and showed me what to do should Dollie move while I was climbing in.

It was a lovely English summer day and I gloried in no hat, a tweed skirt, long brown stockings with my English shoes and gloves. It was a long, lonely, eight-mile, uphill pull to Bunjil and I was glad when I got there. I saw some stores in the shade of the railway shed and, climbing out, I led Dollie over the railway lines. (She hates them and will not go over them if she can help it.) Out of the tail of my eye I saw the lumpers come over. I knew that the sight of a 'skirt' would make their day. The stores were ours all right. I began to move over some plants I had in the cart – they were for Mrs A, as I was going back to their farm. The lumpers came over and stood in a ring, grinning broadly. They looked at the stores, they looked at the cart and, lastly, they looked at me – five foot three and a half inches, weighing seven stone eight pounds. They asked me how I thought I was going to get the stores in the cart. I replied that I didn't think at all, I knew they would fix it for me. This was chicken-feed to them after lumping wheat, especially talking to a female!

By the time I had reached the Andersons, I had been 14 miles and had seen no one, although I had seen the Smith brothers away on the hill, drilling. When I was near the Andersons' boundary, I picked up Tom who was doing some burning off. When I told Mrs A that I was the forerunner and that the men, Rusy and George Anderson, would be over at sundown with the tractor, truck and drills, she was delighted and soothed my hungry tummy with hot cake and milk.

Mrs J had given me some clothes her daughter had grown out of for the children and I was soon busy fitting, cutting and sewing. We had our tea but still no men, although we could hear the tractor gradually getting nearer. Later, Mrs A and I walked on to the hill to watch the lights of the truck showing the tractor the way, as they were going across country and needed to dodge the trees. George was in the truck because he has sight in only one eye. When they got to the road, they changed over as George knew the way then. Rusty came on in the truck so that he could pick me up (and the stores) and we could go home. The cart was staying with Tom for the next day.

When at last Rusty and I reached home, very tired, we opened the stores, as we usually treated ourselves to a bottle of wine. We had a glass of wine with a biscuit and so to bed, after a long day...

Later in May

On Monday morning, early, just as the sun was rising over the sand plain and making the dewdrops on the cobwebs sparkle like diamonds, you might have seen six huge horses striding over the sand plain and, behind them, little me, attached to long leading reins. Twice I had to pull them up as they threatened to run away with me. When we turned the corner of the 'park' and crossed the new-born crop towards the drill, they smelled work and slowed down. By the time I had taken the cover off the drill and was arranging the chains and swings, Rusty arrived in the truck and filled the drill. It

was virgin scrub which had been burned by fire and, as we had some wheat seed left and were using Arthur Spencer's horses, we were drilling the seed straight in without ploughing. Rusty was knocking down anthills just ahead of me, clearing away any large wood or stones, etc. All day I had the time of my life, driving the team. Rusty would fill up the drill when necessary and pull out any difficult stumps that got caught.

All kinds of things, like bits of machinery and old bags, were tied on the back to help make a seed bed. Rusty cut the first round out and, going with him and seeing how rough it was, I was a bit scared and wondered if I would manage on my own. After the first round, it seemed easy enough as long as the line horse had her mind on the job. In spite of the wind, I enjoyed it. The sighing and groaning of the disks working and the rattle of the chains were rather pleasant; the clop, clop, clop of the horses' hooves and the popping of the dead sticks as they broke like little fireworks going off. It was lovely to watch the horses' heads as they pulled – going up and down in time, almost rippling like coloured waves – and the funny little plovers running behind in their little dinner jackets (they only resemble the English plovers in that they nest in ploughed land). They are so terribly inquisitive and very fussy; if Judy walks quite harmlessly across the paddock they will all fly close around her, chattering angrily all the time, ready to swoop and peck if she so much as lifts her head.

All day I drove the team, until 3pm. At lunch-time, I boiled the billy on a stump that was burning out and we sat in the truck, out of the wind, and picnicked with the *Children's Newspaper* to read while waiting for the team to finish their meal. At 3pm, I walked home through the park, with only the sun to guide me, to get tea. I *did* enjoy my day.

Next day, I stayed at home and cooked bread, etc, for two days, and then went out again. I begged Rusty to let me take the team home this time. He said I would never be able to hold them going home. I thought I would, so he let me go. I was all right over the crop, but when we turned the corner I could not step over the low scrub quick enough and the team smelled the stables: I had to let them go or I would have fallen. When no one was holding them, they stopped and were in a circle. I was vainly trying to untangle them when Rusty came around the corner and laughingly got them straight – and I went home in the cart!!

Note

One day, returning from Latham, Judy jumped off the back of the truck without our noticing until we got home. We never saw her again, but we know what happened – she ate dingo bait on her way home: her disobedience and greed caused her death.

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Late spring

Puss regularly brings in young rabbits now. The bobtail is about again and the hot days are arriving. The blowflies cover the floor because soon it will be too hot and they will die. When a cat walks across the room, there is a buzzing tempest of disturbed flies for a minute; gradually the storm dies down and all is quiet again, except for a few early flies. The water-bags are full and the butter cooler soaking, every sign that summer is in the air. The ants begin to hunt above ground again and even stray bees come, making sure the water-bag is in the same place...

The Australian bush – the plains and forests – is queer. In England, to walk alone in woods or over moors and hills, you have a most wonderful feeling as though the very spirit of God surrounds you, filling you with a wonderful peace. In Australia, to walk alone is to be surrounded with doubt and fear of some hidden evil spirit. The forests seem full of trickery and birds and animals alike can be ghostly and frightening. The flowers fade so quickly when you touch them and there is an eerie silence that you can *hear* everywhere. I think it is because Australia, as a land, is very old. It has not been tamed like England...

Thoughts on summer rain

The heat was so terrific – so oppressive – that it was death-like and still. A hushed silence hung over the earth as though it were the dead of night instead of mid-afternoon. There was not even a breath of hot wind to stir a leaf. The little bush birds had forsaken the dead bough of the old gum

tree near the bird bath and they stood in pathetic stillness under the scrub, their little wings held out, their beaks open, their whole being one little, heaving, panting bundle of feathers.

In the fowl-yard peace reigned, all squabbles forgotten in the heat. In the shelter of the hen-house stooped the birds, the old rooster's tail drooping to the dry earth. A longtail curled asleep in the cooler darkness of one of the nests. In the horse-yard, the old mare stood dozing, with her nose just touching the tepid water in the trough. Leaning against the shady side of the shed lay the cow, slowly chewing, now and again swishing a stray fly with her tail.

On the verandah of the house dozed old Barrie, very fitful and restive was his dozing. Something worried him, not only the flies and this heat, but the stillness. He was conscious of no bees around the water-bag. Too hot, he supposed. Even that wretched hornet that would fly so near to his nose on her way to that nest she was building seemed less energetic this afternoon. Puss sat straight and still in the doorway – even she was gently panting. Come to think of it, Barrie himself was panting, in between snapping off a persistent fly. A drink? He thought not – he would be sick. Someone came out to the water-bag, disturbing the flies for a while. The sky looked dullish green.

Down under the ground, hundreds and hundreds of ants were not idle. All the ants, big and little, were very busy, terribly busy, shutting all their front doors and building high walls to protect the one back door they would leave open until the very last moment. Every few minutes, they grew more frantic and hurried and scurried more quickly. 'Hurry!' they cried to each other as they ran. 'Hurry, or we will be too late.'

Old Barrie stretched himself further into the earth, trying to find greater coolness. A bobtail stole round the corner of the verandah into the shade: Barrie only frowned at him in between pants. Expectancy hung in the air now: the animals, birds, insects, the bushes, all the earth waiting. Something *must* happen in this stillness, this heat, this overpowering silence!

Plop! Plop! Plop! In front of the verandah were about 12 large, round, wet marks in the sand. Barrie raised his head and sniffed. The ants went frantic and hurried, as though possessed. Plop! Plop! Plop! The wet marks were twice as large. A crash of thunder and down *fell* the rain. Faster and faster, harder and harder it fell. The noise on the iron roof was deafening. The slashing wet sand disturbed Barrie and he slunk nearer the house, shivering. Puss sat still, watching. The ants had shut themselves in their forts and were praying they would not be flooded out.

Fifteen, twenty minutes and the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun. A clear, cool stillness for a moment and the smell of wet sand and freshly washed leaves.

Puss moved. She stretched her long back, yawned and walked calmly out into the dripping world, daintily shaking a hind paw as it trod on the edge of a puddle. Off through the scrub she went, quite on her own business. The birds, waking from their stupor, flew up into the branches, shaking their wet feathers and singing with all the joy of life. Some hopped about the wet earth, chirping as they hunted their supper. The mare gave a whinny and, shaking herself, raced round the yard just for fun! The cow mooed to be milked. Panic broke out in the fowl-yard, the longtail had been discovered by some indignant hen. Barrie tore off to give his assistance.

In the clear sky, the setting sun smiled on the freshly washed and scented earth before she, too, disappeared to the world beyond the sand plain.

Letter to Margaret, aged seven

Fairy thoughts by a water-hole in the spring in Western Australia.

In the winter, all the seashore fairies leave the cold, bleak snow-white beaches and move to the bush. That is why, after the rains, you will find darling, wee rock holes which are really fairy grottos. These seashore fairies always make them their grottos. That is why you find moss soft and springy and short green grass gently growing around them. Every morning, just after the sunrise when the dewdrops are sparkling everywhere, the fairies bathe in their grotto, shaking the wee fairy fern for a shower bath and then lying in new, pinky sundews to dry. That is why they are always scented like flowers and the stickiness of the sundew is the part that dries them. Sometimes, the kind-hearted old spiders weave the finest webs for them and the dew drops, clinging lovingly, make wonderful mirrors. If the grotto is an extra large one and beautiful, there is always a soft, green

lawn for them to dance on on moonlit nights. Sometimes you can even see the fairy queen's throne. She has many of them all over the world, for she and her court always fly to the best part of the world for their evening fun. Each little beautiful fairyland spot in the world has a specially appointed little elfin – not an elf, but an elfin. He sends messages to the queen whenever the climate and scenery is beautiful enough for her majesty and he arranges for the fairy band. His wife the elfiness, asks the spiders, the dewdrops, the singing frogs, the moonbeams, the murmuring whispers in the trees, the roar of the waves, or the hush-hush of the grasses to help make the night a success.