

BARNEYS AUCTIONS

By Uncle Jasper

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Barney O'Connell was an old Grump He didn't mind who he offended as long as they came to his auctions and bid. He liked those who stood up to him, except for his daughter, Kathleen. He left school before the Nuns got around to teaching him the grammatical uses of the apostrophe.

Chapter – 1

In 1949 about three and a half years after the war ended, Barney found what he was looking for.

What he saw was a large, ungainly building, lingering in spite of the modernity that was creeping up on it. The odd looking structure fronted one of the main roads into the city. It had been built with a timber frame, the rest corrugated iron. Dilapidated, neglected.

Nailed to the centre one of the three large double doors a roughly painted sign proclaimed - **For rent ask at forge**. It too was weather beaten, and could have been nailed to the door months ago.

Barney stopped his car and went into the dingy interior of the forge. It was warm. Dimly lit by the fire, which had been allowed to die down. An elderly man sat on a rickety wooden kitchen chair and puffed tobacco smoke from a pipe with a short, curved stem. He wore a blacksmith's leather apron which fell to below his knees when he stood up.

"How much rent do you want for this old dump?" asked Barney..

"Go in first, if yer like, and have a squiz at them." The man indicated a door that opened into the darkness of the middle store. "Lift the bar and open them front doors to let some light in and yer can have a good look round. Just close the doors and put the bars back where they were when yer finish."

"No lights?"

"Nuh! Yer can open them big doors, or strike matches, just as yer like."

"I wouldn't take a match in there, everything's dried out and ready to burn, the place'd go up like a bonfire."

"Just as yer like," said the man. "It's five quid a week."

Barney went in and unbarred the double doors which opened flat against the front of the building, partly obscuring the windows.

The building was divided into three. That is three large sheds made out of one very large shed and separated by flimsy interior walls.

It was big enough for what he wanted. A few bags of produce of some kind lay on low platforms that had been built around the walls which were of rusty corrugated iron, obviously second hand. The sun's rays pierced a few nail holes in the roof and directed downwards narrow little shafts of light through which dust motes were brightly illuminated as they floated by.

He soon found another door which opened into the third tenement. It was exactly the same size and appearance as the two others.

Satisfied that it was what he wanted Barney returned to the forge. 'I could use it,' he said. 'But the rent's a killer. I could go to three pound ten for this old rat castle but that's really straining the budget. I'll pay fortnightly in advance, too.'

"I keep tellin' yer," said the blacksmith. "It's five pounds."

"Well, it's going to be empty for a long time if you can't do any better than that.

'Yer a hard man

"No I'm not, but I'm full bottle on the subject of rents, and you're asking too much.

The blacksmith knew how long it was since he had painted the sign and nailed it to the door. A few people had made enquiries about the property but they wanted him to knock down the old structure and put up modern shops in its place, then they would consider renting. Barney was the best prospect that had walked into the place for months, and he was talking about cash in hand.

"Alright," he said, 'Four pound ten, but I can't go any lower than that."

"Yes you can. I should have me head read, but I'll go to four quid, that's me final offer. When I come back next month it'll be three pound ten shillings, and after that, ten shillings less, down to three pounds."

"Alright," said the blacksmith. "Yer not a bad bloke so I'll give you a bargain. Four quid, and I want two weeks in advance."

"OK" said Barney. 'It's against my better judgement, but I don't mind starving." He put a five pound note down on the anvil, and three one pound notes.

"I've run out of receipts," said the blacksmith. 'I been meaning to get another book, but I been busy and haven't had a chance."

"It doesn't matter, old timer, where I come from a hand-shake is better than a receipt any day. My name's Barney, and I'll be back tomorrow morning at six o'clock."

"Me name's George," said the blacksmith to Barney as he departed.

George was not unhappy at being beaten down by his tenant. Four pounds was not too bad a rent for the times. "While the war and the petrol rationing was on there were horses everywhere," he told acquaintances afterwards. "Now the rationing's finished, me business'll go the same way. All the cockies round here are buying trucks and cars now to cart their stuff to market, and that's no good to me. I'll keep the forge going for a while but if I can get two quid a week rent for it I'll retire. That'll be six quid a week altogether for the missus and me, we can live on that."

Barney arrived next morning in a blitz buggy bought in a government disposal sale. It had travelled thousands of miles through the outback during the war and had once been shot at during a Japanese air raid on Darwin. It still had bullet holes in it as a memento of the occasion.

Barney said six o'clock and he meant it. He turned up on time in the battle weary old vehicle, but the blacksmith was not yet there.

This did not deter Barney. After getting out his tools and fiddling with the ancient lock on the door he managed to open it and went in through the blacksmith's premises to get to his own. He lifted the bar and pushed open the two doors of the end tenement. It was the one furthest from the forge. Sunshine flooded the interior showing how old, how dilapidated it was, how dusty.

"Come on, Kath," he said to his passenger. "You start untying the ropes and I'll stack these bags out of the way until we can get rid of them."

The builder of the shed must have had some timber left over and built a low platform around the wall. A few bags of horse feed were lying on it.

'Yuck!' said Kathleen, Barney's daughter, gazing with disgust at the spider webs that were everywhere, and the haze of dust that had been stirred up by their feet. 'You're not going to start a business here, are you?'

Barney had already hoisted a bag to his shoulder, but looked round with surprise. "Why not? What's wrong with it?"

"It's old, it's dirty, it's horrible, it's full of spider webs, and it's going to fall down one day."

"Well, it won't fall down today, and when I get enough stock in it won't be able to. Now forget about the spiders and just untie the ropes. I want to get a second load in before dark, and another in the morning for a six o'clock start."

"I'm not working here. You didn't say anything about spiders so you can do it all yourself."

"Bloody women! Well, I'm not going to pay you for not working"

"I don't expect you to. I'll wait outside until you finish."

Barney had stacked the truck almost beyond its capacity, but it still operated and had got them there. In a bad mood he started to throw back the ropes that had stopped much of the load from tumbling off as they jolted towards their destination.

A gaunt man in his mid twenties, leaning against a door post with arms folded, had been watching this little difference between father and daughter. He had an appreciative eye for Kathleen who was just twenty two, had dark hair like her father, but was much better looking.

He came forward. "G'day Boss," he said, do you want a hand?"

Barney looked at him. "You're a bloody walking skeleton," he said. "What makes you think you can do any hard yakka?"

"That's alright, I'm plumping up nicely. I was a guest of the Emperor of Japan for three and a half years, mostly in Changi or on the railway. You should'a seen me when I first arrived home. I was crook in hospital for a long while after, but I'm alright now."

"Yair. I was in motor parts procurements during the war, that wasn't much fun either, and now, me daughter's walked off the job on account of some bloody spiders."

"Well, I can help. I'm stronger than I look. What are you offering?"

"Two and six an hour."

"Well, eight hours is worth a quid. It's six now and if I work to four you'll owe me twenty five bob."

"It's a quarter past and the clock's ticking, now start undoing those ropes, and if anything looks like it's going to fall on you give me a hoy."

"Sounds alright by me. Let's get into it. By the way, my name's Don."

"Yair, I'm Barney."

Barney had a lot on the truck. There were wardrobes, dressing tables, mattresses, kitchen tables, and chairs, tools pictures. There were ornaments too, they were wrapped in paper and packed inside the wardrobes

"Where'd all this come from?" asked Don as they emptied the truck and ranged its contents on the platform around the walls."

"It's from me shop in Carlton. It was too small, and anyway it's gunna be pulled down next month. I should'a been out weeks ago but I only found this place yesterday and had to act fast."

"Yair, I was talking to George and he said you were moving in today, but he didn't know what business you were in. What have you got, a second hand joint?"

"That's it. Everything bought and sold. I reckon I could run an auction room out of here. Anyway I'm going to give it a go. I've applied for an auctioneer's license."

"I hope you get it. And what happened to the blitz buggy? It's full of holes."

"Yair, they tell me it was on the wharf in Darwin when the Japs were bombing the place and sinking ships in the harbour. Some of our blokes had machine guns and took them on. Anyway, one of Jap planes flew low over the water and the machine gunners were tracking it as it went past. They didn't notice the old buggy until it got in the way, by then it was full of holes, the driver evacuated in time, though he might have evacuated in more ways than one."

As soon as everything was off and stacked against the walls, Don threw all the ropes and packing into the back of the truck while Barney dragged the doors shut and dropped the bar into place.

George the blacksmith had watched all this with great interest. No horses had been brought in that day to be shod so he had plenty of time to look on and marvel at Barney's energy.

He was told he would have to come at six every morning or else give his tenant a spare key. He didn't mind that. There was nothing in the forge worth taking. The anvil was too heavy to lift without a crane, and no one wanted blacksmithing tools anyway, it was a dying trade. They could come in by way of the forge if they wanted to.'

Kathleen was squeezed between the two men on the front seat as they returned to Carlton, an inner suburb of Melbourne. She made it quite clear to her father that if he wanted to employ her in this new business he would have to eliminate the spiders, and their webs, and do something to make the premises a bit more presentable.

Barney drove grim faced while being lectured, but Don filled any spaces in the conversation with tales of his three days of fighting in Singapore, his three years of detention in Japanese prison camps, and the months in hospital afterwards.

Chapter – 2

The same day that Barney's Auctions opened for business Don's employment was made permanent. Barney went out a lot, inspecting furniture for sale or attending auctions. Don stayed behind to look after the business, and acted as storeman during the auctions.

One day Barney went to an auction where thirty rolls of linoleum floor covering, the property of an insurance company, were on sale. He came to an arrangement with a fellow dealer not to bid against each other and they took fifteen rolls each

The lino was in tightly wrapped cylinders about six feet long and when standing on end were taller than either of the two men. A carrier brought them on the day following the auction. Barney, stubborn as usual, and in spite of the well founded doubts of Don, insisted on leaning them against the side wall.

He had a verbal battle with the carrier who was in the union and refused to do more than help lower the rolls off his truck to the ground. Barney contended that it was part of his duty to assist carrying them inside but the man stood by his principles and refused to stir from the back of the truck. Unions were something else that Barney detested.

The wooden trolleys used to wheel in the weighty rolls were second hand. They were heavy and big with steel wheels and they had to drag them loaded with one roll a time across the room and up the extra foot on to the platform.

The fifteen rolls of lino were almost all in, standing on end, and leaning against the wall that separated them from the forge when fate intervened.

Barney's temper was not improved when the blacksmith came in to complain about a bulge that had appeared on his side of the wall. He had heard a creaking noise too, as though it was under strain.

Barney guessed the distortion was caused by the stack of lino. but he said there was no problem. George was not satisfied; he insisted it was no laughing matter and if Barney brought any more lino in he was likely to push the whole building over and involve them both in ruin.

She's as sweet as a nut," said Barney. "That wall'd stand up to twice the weight. If you're worried we'll bring some rolls into the forge and lean them against the wall on your side, that should do the trick." To prove the solidity of the wall he kicked the nearest roll of lino. A sudden cracking noise followed. Some vertical studs scraped loose at the bottom and shot outwards into the forge. They were followed by the fifteen rolls of lino which fell through onto the floor while the top of one landed in the fire causing an eruption of sparks and flame.

"Jeez!", said Don. "What a dill! Stubborn old bugger." He grabbed a bucket and dipped into the vat of water alongside the anvil, George, the blacksmith, did the same and they threw water on the fire until the forge was full of smoke, steam and flying ash as well as the stink of frying lino.

The blacksmith was aggrieved by the accident. "You're bloody hopeless, Barney. 'I'll have to get the fire going again, there are some horses coming over and the owner wants them shod today. What the hell did you think you were doing, leaning all them heavy rolls of lino against the wall? You should'a known they wouldn't take the weight." "You'll have to take all this stuff out pronto. I've got a business to run here."

"Don, give him your bucket!"

"A bucket?" said the outraged blacksmith, "What the hell do I want a bucket for?"

Barney glared at him, hands on hips. "You can cry into it. You're not going to weep on my shoulder; I got work to do."

"Bloody oath you've got work to do. You're to get all this lino off my floor, and put the wall back the way it was."

He was shouting but Barney quietened him with a gesture. "No, listen. I should have me head read, but I like this place and I'll buy it from you, money in hand, and kiss you goodbye. Now, old timer, what's your price."

The blacksmith was taken aback. 'I don't know. I've never thought of selling the place. As far as I'm concerned it's money in the bank, and I can sell it when prices go up.'

'You'll be waiting a long time. Alright, we'll talk about it later.' Barney had been distracted by the sight of a vehicle that had pulled up in front of his premises.

A man had driven up in an antique motor car. The vehicle had a brass framed oval radiator and fastened to it was a metal badge representing crossed cannon barrels. A gas producer had been welded on to the folding luggage carrier at the back with two bags of charcoal tied alongside as fuel.

Barney paid no attention to the gas producer. These devices were a war time invention to make up for the shortage of petrol. It was discovered that gas from burning coke would do the job well enough. Most were dumped as soon as petrol rationing ended.

Barney was looking instead at furniture tied inexpertly to the broad, flat roof of the car.

"May I speak to the manager?" asked the driver getting out in front of the auction room. He had on an old fashioned flat motoring cap and an ankle length dust coat.

"He went mad and they shot him. What do you want?"

"Are you the manager?"

"No, I sweep the joint, and if you think this is the garbage tip think again, the nearest one's about five miles that way." He gestured vaguely with his thumb.

"My wife told me to bring some furniture here for sale by auction, but first I wish to discuss the matter with the manager."

"What's to discuss? We'll drag it off and sell it for you next Wednesday, no worries. We only charge ten percent commission."

"Yes, but I want a reserve placed on the furniture.. I want to see the manager and discuss the matter before I leave anything for sale. My wife was most insistent that I place an upset price with your firm so her furniture would not be sold too cheaply. We have heard that in auction rooms sometimes goods are almost given away."

Without comment Barney climbed on to the running board and stood on the little door mat fastened there by the makers so that fastidious travellers could wipe their feet before entering the vehicle. The rear half of the car was completely enclosed for the comfort of passengers but the driver was shielded by nothing but the windscreen and the roof.

Behind the driver was a small, sliding glass window, and through it he could receive his instructions from the car's owner

An Edwardian dining suite had been loaded into and on top of the old car. On the roof was a plush-covered, roll end couch with a carved lion's head snarling from the centre of the roll, the bottom half of a sideboard, an extension table with its legs sticking in the air, all made of light coloured oak.

Packed into the passengers' compartment were six old dining chairs and two elbow chairs, nicely carved and upholstered in plush, together with the mirror top unscrewed from the sideboard.

"We have had these things a number of years," explained the customer. My wife decided she wanted new furniture so we invested in a walnut veneer dining suite with frosted glass doors on the buffet."

Barney shook his head. "Just like a woman! I know my wife is never happy unless she's spending my dough. Take my advice, Pop, don't you put up with it! Women get ideas like this. You gotta show her who's boss at your place."

The customer raised his eyebrows at this. "It's too late. We already know who's boss in our house - she is! But to get back to the subject, she told me she wanted to put an upset price of twenty five pounds on what we have here." He gestured towards the car.

Without answering Barney roared a couple of times into the recesses of the auction room for Don. Presently Don, who had been shifting the lino, appeared on the footpath and sprang to a mock salute. "Reporting for duty, sir," he said.

"Give him a match."

Don, who was wearing a carrier's white apron, though rather dirty, reached into the big pocket in front and produced a box of safety matches.

"Give it to him," ordered Barney, indicating the customer who looked at the match and looked at Barney.

"Go on, have one and you can take your stuff a long way from here and set fire to it. A match is about the cheapest thing you can get these days and it's your best chance to clean up this old junk."

"What do you mean? This furniture is craftsman built; no one could make anything like it these days. twenty five pounds is a very reasonable price."

Barney now had his arm round the other's shoulder in a fatherly manner. "Of course it is. You're right, you're dead right; in fact I know a man down at the blind asylum, if he could see it he'd give you twenty five quid, no trouble at all."

The customer, who was fascinated and overwhelmed by Barney's personality, made no attempt to shrug the arm from his shoulders and Barney continued, shaking him a little to emphasise each point.

"You young blokes," he said, "that go scorching round the country in hot rod motor cars."

The man glanced at his ancient vehicle. It could have been wound up to about forty miles an hour in an emergency; but he said nothing.

"You young blokes with leather jackets and knuckle dusters splashing your money around giving girls expensive walnut veneer dining suites, you've got to face up to reality. These are modern times, you see. Your missus, she wants new furniture; well, so does everyone else. You say it's good workmanship, right! go to the top of the class. But who wants quality now? Who wants workmanship? People nowadays are like the little woman; they want veneer; they want frosted glass; they want stuff that's slapped together with glue and tacks. Give it a good kick in the arse and what happens? it falls apart in a cloud of bulldust. but who cares? That's what they want, that's what they get. Now I can see you're a man of taste and discernment, so I'll tell you something." He paused but the bemused customer did not argue.

"One of these days people are going to wake up to what the manufacturers are doing to them. When all this junk furniture is clapped out they'll come looking for the good stuff they threw away. Take my word for it. Keep this suite another twenty years or so and it will be worth real money. Now, be firm with your missus; go home, tell her you changed your mind and you're going to keep the good furniture and throw out the junk, instead of the other way round. Go home now, be firm with her! Tell her I said so."

The man shook his head silently.

"You reckon she won't come at it?"

He shook his head again.

"Are you a man or a mouse? Lead the revolution of downtrodden men and strike a blow for husbands everywhere. I mean to say I'll come with you and hold the back door open while you make your getaway. I'll even help you carry out the walnut veneer suite and bring it down here for sale."

There was a negative response to this proposition also.

"Can't I sell this furniture at any price?" asked the man.

"Yes you can, my boy. I'm not saying you can't, but it's the price, you see. Everything in the world has a price, but for this stuff it's pretty low. You're asking twenty quid, well that's putting a hurdle in the way that a kangaroo couldn't jump over. Now I've given you some good advice about how to straighten out your marriage and keep this nice old suite at the same time. But if you're not game to take my advice we have to consider what happens next. I tell you what I'll do; we'll haul it all inside, put it up for auction on Wednesday and sell for the best price. We charge ten percent commission but I won't take a penny reserve. If it sells for a quid the lot that's too bad; but I don't want you or the missus grizzling at me about the price afterwards.

A reserve price and you can take your match and go, no reserve and we'll put it in the auction and do the best we can for you."

"You're not giving me much choice," complained the customer.

"You're another helpless victim of fashion," said Barney "I've seen it so often in this line of business. There was a strong man in here yesterday, just like you. You should'a seen him cry

when he was telling me how much his missus had cost him over the years: it cut into his drinking money, and he couldn't afford more than five packs of smokes a day because of her wasteful ways."

"These women are all the same; they want what the mob wants. You can haul your furniture to every auction room in Melbourne and you'll find it the same old story; junk they want, because they can sell it. Good stuff like this, no, because it's old fashioned."

The customer at last gave in to this flood of eloquence, left the furniture for unreserved sale. Instantly Barney and Don started to unload the old car and with a good deal of quarrelling, exhortation and banter they had the suite set up and displayed as well as possible on the already crowded auction platform.

"Who is that man? Does he own the business?" enquired the customer as Mrs Spear, newly hired to do the office work, wrote a receipt for the goods.

"He certainly is," said the lady. "He's a stubborn, workaholic eccentric, and he'd better build me an office because I'm not going to sit at a kitchen table taken out of stock and no way of filing anything except holding the papers down with bricks."

The customer took the ticket and eyed it dubiously. "We may not get much for the suite but at least I have met three originals today. I must make a point of coming to the auction."

He went off to face his wife, but first had to start the engine of his car. It was a complex operation. With a small hearth shovel he topped up the supply of glowing charcoal in the gas producer, and adjusted various valves and controls attached by baling wire. Each of the four engine cylinders had to be primed from a precious reserve of petrol. With a can and funnel he introduced a few drops through four small metal cups in the cylinder head. He explained to Don, who was watching with great interest that the engine ran satisfactorily on charcoal gas but needed petrol to kick it off. After the engine had been primed the four cylinder cocks were turned off so no compression could escape. The final test was to see if the machine would actually go after all these preparations. The engine chattered into life at the first swing of the starting handle and the man ran and leapt into the driver's seat before it could die away again. He nodded to Don and drove off. The long handled gear lever and hand-brake were both mounted outside the car and as the speed increased Don could see the driver's hand changing gear.

Chapter – 3

Soon after eight o'clock one morning two men went to view an old house under sentence of demolition. It had stood unremarked in a shady street for over seventy years, soundly built, in the fashion of its day, of coloured handmade bricks and lime mortar with a slate roof now crusted with moss.

Across the front of the house was a veranda roofed with corrugated iron. Under the edge of the veranda roof an iron, lacework frieze almost concealed by ivy and supported by fluted iron columns, all resisted neglect and age. The veranda floor was paved with terra-cotta tiles decorated in a fleur-de-lis pattern and finished off with a basalt coping stone from which one could step down a few inches to the weedy lawn. The floor was starting to subside so the tiles were cracking here and there. In the middle of the veranda were two steps, also of basalt stone, flanked by terra-cotta urns and leading down to a yellow gravel path almost washed away and overgrown.

The veranda had sheltered generations of children, adults, and animals in its time. For almost forty years a sulphur crested cockatoo had lived in the house to be put out on the veranda

in mild weather chained to a galvanized iron perch. It passed its days screeching now and then or repeating familiar phrases in a low, scratchy voice. It greeted visitors with more screeching and bobbing up and down on its perch.

The veranda had shielded the front of the house from hot sunlight and driving rain. Now the children and adults, dogs, cats, and the cockie had all gone their way leaving the trees and bushes to flourish for lack of a restraining hand.

A Moreton Bay fig tree had come to dominate the front garden stretching its vast limbs over house and lawn alike. The ground was now seamed and bisected with big, knotty tree roots that had gradually wrenched themselves from the soil, until there was no more smooth ground, only barren earth littered with broad leaves fallen from the tree.

Seventy years before Edward Sturgess and his wife, lately emigrated from England, had bought the land, distant from the city, for £35 and had built on it a very fine house, now hopelessly dated and old fashioned.

The house was uneconomic. Even more so was the tree which clutched greedily at hundreds of square feet of valuable real estate. Both would have to go to make room for a block of flats.

While the men were sitting in the cabin of their truck surveying the decaying house and garden the solicitor they had come to meet drove into the street and stopped his car behind them.

They got out, greeted one another, and pushed at the shabby wicket gate until it scraped open against the gravel path, which divided on either side of the tree to meet again at the front steps. It had rained during the night and they were forced to duck now and then to avoid water sodden bushes which overhung the path.

At the front door Wilkie, the solicitor, produced an old fashioned key tied with string to a cardboard label,

"I didn't know old Teddy Sturgess lived here," said Chip Dowd, one of the men, glancing round. "I guess it would have been a pretty good house in its day; o'course it's had the gong now."

"It's still sound," said the solicitor, who had opened the door after trouble with the key, "but it would be expensive to restore and people don't want old houses like this nowadays; they're a drug on the market."

"It's better than the old weatherboard joints we're renting," commented Tom Neerim, Dowd's mate. "I wouldn't mind having it. How long did Teddy live here?"

"The executor told me he lived in the house all his life with his sister Violet until she passed away some years ago and he died in his bed here last August. Neither of them married and a niece and nephew have inherited the estate. There was no will, of course, but they are the only known relatives. There should be no problems with probate, and the Trustee wants everything cleared up as quickly as possible."

"We wondered why we hadn't seen him for a while," said Tom peering into the dimness of the long passage which bisected the house. "He was lucky, his old man left him this place. He wouldn't have been smart enough to get one for himself."

"Chip was unusually animated as he reminisced about the late Mr Sturgess. "He was an old ratbag, that bloke. Gawd, some of the things he used to get up to! He was as mad as two bob watch."

The solicitor pursed his lips but said nothing.

"He was dead nuts on taking people to court and he was always after the Prime Minister or the Minister of Transport to get them up before the beak, or trying to collect damages from some poor bunny."

"Yes," agreed the solicitor. I suppose it was common knowledge that he was eccentric. He approached me once to start proceedings against the Commonwealth Electoral Office because he had been beaten in a Senate election. He was convinced that the returning officer had rigged the votes against him."

"Yair, I remember; he stood for the Vegetarian party and was going to abolish gambling, and drinking. That'd go over pretty big with the local publicans and SP bookies. How did you get on with the court case?"

"I didn't. I refused to proceed in the matter and advised him to forget it. Not that he did, of course. There are a lot of old law books in the house, so he conducted the case himself. After that he was declared a vexatious litigant and he couldn't sue anyone without the permission of the court."

"That was old Teddy, alright. It wouldn't have stopped him. Do you remember the time he tried to get a license to start a bus line? They wouldn't give him permission to sell bus tickets but no one could stop him selling lollies and ice-cream. Everyone that got on to the bus had to buy a bag of lollies or an ice cream. Then they got a free bus ride. The business went bust, of course. It couldn't do anything else, not with Teddy in charge."

The solicitor was interested by these tales of his late client but he had other things to do. He said, "Well, I am glad you told me all this but we did not come here to discuss Mr Sturgess's activities. What I have to get from you is a price for the demolition of the house."

"It won't be any picnic bowling over the old tree and grubbing out the stump," said Tom.

"Oh, forget the tree. We'll get the professionals in. I should think you would need specialized equipment for a big job like that. Just give us a price for the house alone."

The two men examined the house critically. They fingered the cast iron lace work that hung like rusty tapestry from the edge of the veranda roof. They kicked at the handmade bricks to see how easily they crumbled and pulled at the wooden laths where some plaster had fallen away in the hall. They examined the long passage that ran through the centre of the house. It was lit with a dusty rose colour from light leaking through the bright red decorated glass surround of the front door.

Most of the rooms were filled with old furniture and trash. Brass bedsteads set with artificial rubies: Decrepit wardrobes and chests: A mahogany hall-stand with bevelled mirrors and brass rails: Disintegrating wicker chairs and wash stands with chipped marble tops: Great bundles of newspapers that turned out on closer inspection to be decaying copies of the *Age* and *Argus* and various Henry George and Douglas Credit publications. They found an antique electric belt with an appendage. It had been devised and discreetly advertised by a long gone professor as an aid to the restoration of male health and virility. The finders thought it long past its use by date and threw it to one side.

One room was so filled with miscellaneous and unrelated articles and furniture that there was no place to stand and Tom Neerim had to walk precariously, as though on stepping stones, across to the window to raise the blind so they could survey it all.

The blind tore in his hand and he impatiently wrenched it down in a torrent of dust to let in the light. The room was like a dusty, untidy warehouse, crammed full, except for where a space had been left that was sufficient to let the door swing open. It was cluttered with neglected furniture, pots and pans, ice chests, books, steamer trunks, and discarded mementoes of a lost Edwardian age.

"Where the hell did he get all this junk from?" Tom wanted to know. "He must have spent years collecting it and dumping it in the house."

"Some of it came from Barney's place," said Chip. "He went to every sale for months and bought heaps of stuff no one else would touch. Then he got crook on Barney over something or other and Barney turfed him out of the joint."

"It is just as well O'Connell did stop him from buying," interposed the solicitor drily. "if he had filled the place completely with this class of merchandise we would really have a problem on our hands. As it is you will have to allow for disposal of it all in your price."

"Yair, but Ken, what if there is anything valuable in this heap of kak, what happens then?"

"I can tell you, I had some valuers down and they said it was not worth carting away, and considering Sturgess's limited means and his taste in auction purchases, I doubt that the question will arise. If you can dispose of anything you find in the house at a profit, do so by all means. I am sure the heirs will not enter an objection. They have examined the house and taken anything of value, which was not much. All we want now is to clear the block as soon as possible."

"Is there anything out the back?"

"Yes. Sheds, outbuildings, assorted scrap-iron; everything has to go. There is even a motor car out there you will have to remove. I want you to clear everything off the block, except the tree - put it all down in the price."

Outside, in a leaky shed made of hand split palings and corrugated iron, they found an old car. It was a Dodge Six, that is six cylinders, with wooden spoked wheels and flat tyres. Once this old car had been a decent looking sedan but someone, probably the industrious Mr Sturgess, had hacked away the back of the body. Everything behind the front seat had gone and been replaced with a flat, wooden tray bolted to the chassis.

"It'd probably still go, you know," opined Tom, "you couldn't stop these old sods with an axe. You remember the way the Dodges used to keep going, don't you, Chip?"

"Too right. My old man had one like this, same model, I think. She'd plug away all day, as long as you liked. She was a real bottler."

"Yair, I know. At night you'd just give her a kick in the behind and leave her out in the rain. It didn't matter, as long as you kept the coil dry. Start her up next day and off she'd go like a beaut."

"That reminds me," muttered the solicitor fumbling through a folder of papers he carried with him. He produced a registration label for the old car. It was a current label that would not expire for another three months. "If your price is satisfactory you can have it, if it is of any use. I found it amongst his papers only the other day and there is so little time for it to run it hardly seemed worth while trying to get a refund on the unexpired portion."

The two contractors were delighted with this offer. "You little beauty!" said Tom. "If we can start this old bomb we'll slap the label on. She'll come in handy hauling stuff to the tip. We could use another truck. Old Gasper still chuffs along but she's not getting any younger."

"Who is," asked the solicitor, "but I have to leave you now. Of course whether or not you get the job depends on your price. In the meantime, if you will excuse me, I will lock up the house and leave you. Don't forget I want the quote in writing and I want it this week. If it is not in this week we will have to get someone else to do the job. Another thing, any contract will have to include a penalty clause; the job must be finished by the end of next month."

He locked the house, took the key, and left them in the back-yard to wander about beating the grass and weeds to locate the various items of rusty machinery that were mouldering away where the eccentric Mr Sturgess had left them.

"I reckon we could have the house down and the land cleared in a month," ventured Chip.

"Yair, a lot of them weatherboards and junk we can burn on the block. There won't be any fire danger days for a few months yet, so we should be sweet. The scrap-iron should sell alright and the oregon and stuff like that out of the house we can sell here or bundle up and take it down for Barney to sell. Most of the junk in the house too, we can put it straight in the auction."

"Ah, bull! He'd throw it at you if you brought it into his place; you know how he goes on when we bring in stuff he doesn't want."

"I dunno. He sold most of it once to Teddy; if he can sell it once he might be able to do it again. We can't be shot for trying and if we can pick up any dough like that, it's all bunce."

"Chip Dowd scratched his mop of fair hair and shrugged. "Alright, but you still gotta work out a price for Ken Wilkie. If it's not right we'll end up getting bugger-all."

"She'll be right pal. Don't get 'em in a knot. We'll work out a price tonight and Marie can write to Wilkie for us. Come on, we'd better get back to Barney's and see if there's any more work on."

Chapter – 4

The rolls of lino lay all night where they had fallen, half in Barney's establishment and half in the forge, protruding through the crumpled wall Barney and his staff were too busy to move them all; they were preparing the room for Wednesday's auction. Everything had to be stacked in the order of sale while carriers and people driving cars with loaded trailers turned up bearing fresh consignments of furniture and odds and ends, all to be listed, numbered and auctioned without reserve.

Barney had rung Marie Neerim soon after the mishap with the lino to say that her husband and Chip Dowd were to come as soon as possible and start moving the rolls and repairing the wall, but the two men were not to be found. They had gone off on a job somewhere and were expected back about tea time.

Barney and Marie had a spirited argument on the telephone about the absence of the two men. Barney was of the opinion they should be around when required but Mrs Neerim retorted that they had other things to do and couldn't come running just because Barney wanted them; they would go broke if they relied on casual work at the auction room. She finished the conversation by giving him a firm ticking off for his rudeness and lack of consideration. Barney enjoyed the argument. He liked Marie, she was one of his favourites.

It was important to get the job fixed as soon as possible. Nothing could be done on Wednesday, and Barney did not want the men moving the lino or fixing the wall because they would be in the retail section of his premises.

Wednesday was auction day and the retail section would be closed and barred. It was a strict, though eccentric rule of the business that no retail sales were conducted, and all retail customers were turned away while the auction was in progress. If the contractors were working in that department they might be tempted to sell something or talk to retail customers.

The men appeared in the middle of the afternoon. They were in two vehicles stacked high with furniture. One was their decaying tip truck which was chattering and rattling towards its final end, the other was the cut down Dodge car, it had been resurrected from the weeds and rubbish through abuse and effort, and Chip's special skill as a mechanic.

Don glanced out at them through the door then put his hands over his eyes to shut out the sight. Both trucks were laden with chattels and old furniture removed from the Sturgess house.

"Oh, no!" he said as the men alighted and came up to him with beaming smiles. "It's not true - you can't do this. Listen, you blokes, you've got it wrong; stuff goes from here to the tip, not the other way round.

"There's no doubt about it, Don," said Tom Neerim grinning broadly, "you're lucky to have mates like us; we could have taken this anywhere, but no, we brought it to you, our old china."

"Where the hell have you been?" shouted Barney, bursting out of the auction room, "never around when you're needed, are you? and what's all this kak?" He shook one of the ropes securing the load on the tip truck.

"We been at the old Sturgess place since six o'clock. Ken Wilkie rang last night to say they were in hurry to get it flattened because the team that's going to take out the tree has been booked for the first of next month, and he accepted our price over the phone.

We were there first thing this morning to pull the lead flashing off the roof and strip the brass fittings out of the house before any tea-leaf could knock them off. We got a decent price at the scrap metal yard; that's a good start on pulling the old place down."

"That doesn't explain what you're doing with all this clapped out old, junk furniture; are you taking it somewhere?"

"Yes, me boy, to you. We had all these lovely antiques to dispose of and you were the first one we thought of -- you're lucky to have friends like us. Come on, Chip, get the ropes off."

Barney had cast a practised eye over the load and was soon satisfied that most of it was saleable, but he was not going to admit that to the two men.

"You're joking!" he complained. "I've seen better stuff sinking in to the West Melbourne swamp. I reckon you knocked this off from the Salvation Army depot. I got a job for you; it'll be better than trying to unload all this useless junk into the auction; why didn't you throw a few matches around in the house and shut the door?"

While he was talking in this vein the two men were casting off the ropes, quite unconcerned by his criticism. From one of the trucks Tom took two chamber pots, one slightly cracked, and a large bedroom jug all decorated with a pattern of roses and twining leaves. He handed these to Barney.

"Don't drop them," he cautioned. "Those thunder mugs are worth a quid each, if they're a worth a penny. They got a thousand and one uses around the home. I was reading on our tablecloth the other day about an artist who uses them to mix up his paint in; and look at that!" he said, slapping the side of a shabby piece of furniture that was about to be taken off the truck. "That's a genuine cedar duchess chest, and the mirror's not broken. Run a coat of tan boot polish over it and you'd get fifteen quid for it on a dark night with a gun."

Don recognized the piece being praised and turned to Barney. "I know that old dressing table. It was the last thing Teddy Sturgess ever bought off us. You two had a blue over something or other and I remember, as well as anything, him driving away in the old Dodge with the chest on the back. He was zig-zagging down the road and hanging out of the window and screaming abuse at you. He said he was going to sue for slander and mental anguish. What was all that about? I meant to ask you before, but it slipped my mind."

"Ah," replied Barney, "Teddy and the old boy next door to him got hold of a lease on a gold mine near Majorca. It's all clapped out now, it stands to reason, the miners in the early days wouldn't have left the place if there was any gold there, and Majorca's on it last legs. Anyway, just before the war someone with more money than sense built a poppet head over the shaft and tried to work it for a while. When they went broke Teddy and his mate hopped in and bought the

lease for a few quid a year, and they were trying to raise money to get the whole thing started again. The way Teddy was going on you'd think it was the biggest money spinner since they invented the mint, and he offered to cut me in so they could put in a winding engine and a cyanide plant. Well, I wasn't going to have any of that, mainly because anything Teddy was in just had to be a fizzer. I said it was alright to chuck his wife's money down a hole in the ground, but he wasn't going to chuck mine after it. That made him jump up and down a bit and he wanted to fight me; then he decided to go away and look up his law books so he could sue me for malfeasance, or whatever it was."

"That's what we like about you, Barney," said Tom Neerim, as he and chip carried the chest into the auction room, "Always a model of tact; it's no wonder he got shirty. But I knew him a bit too and he was as silly as a goanna in season. Every scheme he ever touched seemed to go wrong somehow." He shook his head thoughtfully and they went inside.

Barney would have said more but he saw Freddy appearing round the corner. The youth's face lit up at the sight of the two vehicles and the activity of the men as they were unloaded.

"G'day, Barn, g'day Don." He ran forward. "Hang on, Tom. I'll give you a hand to cart the stuff inside."

"Back off ! Back off, Freddy!" roared Barney, 'don't you touch anything, you'll break it.' He had had a painful experience due to the young man's activities.

"I'm just goin' to give 'em a bit of a hand."

"They don't need a hand, just get out of the way, clear off!"

"Ya minjy old cow, why don't ya give me a job? What's wrong, Barn, why've you got me in the gun like this?"

"Gawd, you're a nasty old bugger at times," said Tom who was standing in the back of the tip truck handing down some rickety Thonet chairs. "Give the kid a go! These auctions of yours are getting bigger every week and if there's only two of you how can you get out to buy new stock. Give Freddy a job and he can watch the place while you're out."

"I'd sooner leave Jack the Ripper in charge of a brothel. Forget it, Freddy; there's no way I'd give you a job."

"He wouldn't know if his bum was on fire," said Freddy "I could be a real help round this place if only he'd give me a job. What's wrong with me; I could talk to the customers better than him, anyway.

"Yair, he's a miserable old bastard, Freddy, always was from a kid. He'll give you a job one of these days; but don't ever make the mistake of being polite to him, that brings out the worst side of his nature C'mon, you can give a hand to get the stuff off the trucks and you can come with us tomorrow and put in a couple'a days helping with the old house.

"What about the wall? demanded Barney I need you blokes here to move the lino and fix the hole," said Barney.

"Sorry, pal, can't do it till Wednesday. We have to get more stuff out of the house before it's knocked off, there's a lot of copper piping built into the place and has to come out. We'll be right for your job on Wednesday."

"Forget it. The wall can stay down until Thursday. I won't have you in there while the sale's on. Useless pair of drongos. No wonder the country's on the bone of its backside; no one works anymore, except me."

His complaints were ignored in the interest of arranging Mr Sturgess's late possessions to advantage on the auction platform. The new owners made sure they were in the best position which was about two thirds of the way through the auction when the crowd would be largest.

Barney was instructed to be at his most eloquent when the time came to offer their goods for sale and not knock them down quickly to his favourite dealers just because they were vendors lots.

Having got everything displayed as well as possible they arranged the chamber pots and jugs and a few ornaments of dubious value on top of their furniture. Then filled them with faded artificial flowers that may have been, at at some distant time, grave decorations, saved by Mr Sturgess.

Chapter - 5

Barney attended the government auctions of the time where vehicles and non lethal equipment left over from the war were sold for the best price. Another blitz buggy came up for sale and he bought it, even though it was more shabby and more beat up than the one he had already.

It was towed to his premises because he couldn't start it. Neither could it be fitted inside under cover. It had to be left on the vacant block between the forge and a Chinese market garden

It should have been safe but he had underestimated the mechanical ability of the local youths. They noted that the truck had been left in the open for a few nights and decided to start it and perhaps have a joy ride.

One of them managed to start the engine of the vehicle about six o'clock on a Sunday morning. The silencer had been removed or fallen off at some time and the noise split the Sabbath calm, scattered it for miles in a roaring cascade of sound.

Blitz-buggies were sturdy vehicles and this one had been started in gear. It instantly took off, but out of control. It cannoned off an old car the local car-wrecker had also stored on the vacant block, tore through the fence of the Chinese market garden and demolished their fowl shed. This sudden onslaught had a catastrophic effect on the physical and mental well-being of a hundred or so chooks roosting contentedly in the shed and created a whirlwind of demented poultry until the buggy finally stalled in the middle of a bed of cabbages.

The market gardeners were having a Sunday morning sleep-in. Some of them had been to market to buy produce for resale and had not got to bed before about half past three in the morning.

They could get some sleep while travelling home because the horses knew the way as well the driver. He would wake up when they stopped outside their property and get down to open the gate to let them in. After that they had a quick rub down and a nose bag of food.

The sleepers were not quick enough out of bed to catch the fleet-footed youths who disappeared over a part of the fence still standing. They were too late except to impound the blitz-buggy, the only hostage left to them.

There was no doubting whose truck it was. The trail led directly back to the O'Connell's establishment and Barney soon guessed something was amiss because of several excited phone calls in Chinese to his home.

At last one of the gardeners calmed down enough to recover his English and explain what had happened. As soon as Mass was over Barney came along to view the destruction.

He was, he thought, very reasonable and sympathetic and offered to have the machine removed the same day, even though it was Sunday but the market gardeners were not satisfied; their minds were running more on substantial compensation for damages and loss of fowls and

cabbages and replacement of fences. Barney discovered after a while that the buggy was not to be removed before a substantial cash payment was made.

Barney then considered himself even more reasonable. He did not intend to pay a penny damages to anyone but offered to give them the buggy in full payment of any claims they might have against him. They could sell it for the best price and keep the money as compensation for their loss and mental anguish.

Feeling that in time of peace a broken down blitz-buggy in the middle of their garden was not an asset they would have desired a racial confrontation soon developed in which Barney was roundly abused in Chinese and broken English.

A policeman was sent for who, appearing after a time on a bicycle, was appealed to for justice and vengeance against the culprit O'Connell. The constable, a big slow-riding man, in a tall, black helmet, was of the same parish as Barney, and they knew one another well.

He inspected the damage and entered the details in his book even an estimate of the loss due to ruined vegetables, fencing, and the shed. "Anyone killed, or injured?" he asked.

No, no deaths or injuries to be reported, if chooks were excluded from the tally.

Hearing this the officer closed his notebook, put an elastic band around it, and returned it to his pocket.

It was satisfying to discover there were no injuries or deaths, not counting fowls that is; only property and pride and repose had been damaged.

He decided he did not have to do anything and that it was a matter for Barney and his neighbours to settle between them.

"It's a civil matter," he declared at last. "If ye want to take action against Mr O'Connell ye'll have to go and see a solicitor. If I find the person responsible for starting the machine there'll be charges laid; but be careful, no threats against Mr O'Connell or ye'll be up on charges yerselves of breachin' the King's Peace."

He said no more and, as no one could give him a description of those actually responsible for the outrage, he confined his actions to shaking his head and, before riding in a dignified manner back to the station.

Still being calm and co-operative, as he considered himself, in the face of oriental hysteria, Barney said, I'll get a ladder out of stock and drop the birds down to you, but someone will have to catch them."

Half a dozen birds were perched unhappily in the branches of nearby trees. In a frenzy of fear they had managed to flap their way up to the lower branches but were now unable to get down without falling and were swaying and clucking unhappily while surveying the distant ground below.

Even this gesture did not appease the Chinese market-gardeners who felt that the occasion called for more positive action. Matters were not improved when two cheerful characters, Tom Neerim and Chip Dowd turned up early that same afternoon with their tip-truck.

Barney had sent for them and they came with their truck and a length of heavy chain borrowed from somewhere. After a lot of shouting, swearing and abortive directions they backed the truck on to the market garden, fastened the chain to both vehicles and began the job of hauling the blitz buggy out of its resting place.

The two men were good mechanics and after tinkering for a while they managed to repeat the miracle of having the engine of the vehicle roar into thunderous life; then, with Chip in the buggy and Tom driving the truck, they attempted to haul it out backwards.

Their first efforts were not rewarding. The bogged vehicle humped up and down a few times when Chip crashed into reverse gear and the rear wheels spun futilely even when rocks and timber were jammed underneath to give the wheels traction. The back wheels of the trucks spun round in a cloud of stinking blue smoke, but without gaining purchase. It was no use and matters were little improved when the spinning wheels tore carrots out of the ground and flung them at random. They were dangerous missiles.

The blacksmith, thought some extra weight would help and brought over two draught horses left with him for the week-end. These animals had been standing patiently in their dark stalls, munching feed or drowsing with their heads hanging down, dreaming, little disturbed by the noise and excitement a short distance away.

They disapproved of being roused from their quiet stalls and came out snorting and tossing their heads. That was even before they caught sight of the labouring machines, the noisy crowd of people and unruly larrikins, and heard the overwhelming racket of the two engines both driven far beyond normal limits.

"I'll help," cried Freddy, running up. "Me old man kept horses and I know all about 'em. I'll take one if you like." He grabbed at the bridle of the nearest horse.

"Get off!" roared the blacksmith, "leave them alone or you'll get you a kick in the bum!"

Freddy paid no attention and the startled horses bolted into a section of the garden that had been kept free of marauding larrikins and idlers. The excitable youth and his mates took off after the runaways, ignoring pleas and shouts in Chinese and English to get the hell off the vegetables.

No one could stop them from making the situation worse; not the market gardeners, nor the few men present who were accustomed to horses and could have got the animals under control easily enough. They had no chance with the youths running round the market-garden calling out and waving.

"She'll be apples," shouted Freddy. "I'll get 'em for you in a minute -- lived on a farm all me life."

"Clear off, Freddy!" roared O'Connell. "Get out before you do any more damage." He knew something about horses too. During the depression he had made a living driving vegetable carts to the Victoria Market, until he got his own stall.

"That's alright Barn." retorted Freddy; "When I've fixed up the horses I'll give you a hand with the truck."

"Just piss off! If I find out who started that thing I'll give you a kick in the arse on me own account."

Freddy was the terror of the neighbourhood and the leader of a gang of youths that made frequent raids on neighbouring market gardens with special attention to the Chinese. No one knew who had started the Blitz Buggy, but because of his reputation he was what would have been described, in later years by the police as a 'Person of Interest.'

Freddy and his friends were too quick to be caught and chased away. They soon had the horses in a frenzy and bolting across the cabbages, over the flattened fence, and out on to the road where they nearly collided with a car or two before heading off into the distance.

With a few words he had picked up in a career at the forge the blacksmith took off after them and was seen a few moments later talking animatedly to the driver of an old Hupmobile who had stopped his car. Then he rode off standing on the running board and gesticulating as the car gently, but noisily accelerated away to pursue the runaway horses.

The blacksmith and his animals having departed interest now centred again on the struggling vehicles. There was nothing else to be done; everyone had to push. Even the Chinese market-gardeners were pressed into service. Up to this time they had stood by disdainfully, not considering it part of their duty to help, as no compensation had been offered, but had merely kept watch to make sure their property was not further damaged. Their only desire after the horses left was to see O'Connell, his machinery, and his helpers off their land as quickly as possible.

Apart from taming horses Freddy's next ambition was to drive the blitz buggy out of the paddock. Turning back to that problem they found him already ensconced in the driver's seat and revving the engine ready to take off. O'Connell dragged him out by the collar and helped him on his way with a cuff on the head but he soon circled back to see where else he could assist.

Everyone who could touch even the tiniest part of either O'Connell's van or the tip truck crowded round the two vehicles to help make a mighty effort. They rammed potato sacks under the spinning truck wheel to give it something to grip on. Some tried to wrench the three inch by two inch timber railing away from the palings of the fallen fence to use as levers, but they were stopped by the indignant proprietors. About twenty or so children were authorised to climb into the empty tip-truck and sit as near to the back as possible to give the wheels better traction.

There was a burst of activity from both vehicles as the grunting crowd tried to rock them back and forth in unison. Two potato sacks shot out from under the wheel giving a hearty slap to one or two of the helpers and causing later unavailing demands for payment of laundry and dry cleaning bills. At the climax of all this effort the blitz-buggy rose as though about to roar backwards over an enemy trench and clanked out of the depression it had dug in the field and roared in reverse in pursuit of the tip-truck, tossing helpers left and right.

No one was hurt. The only casualties had been fowls, and vegetables. The paling fence had lost some panels which were now splintered and broken beyond any hope of restoration, and the teetering fowl house.

The market gardeners were hunting everyone off their property preparatory to a busy session of damage repair.

"Leave it there Barn, she'll be right," advised Tom Neerim, as soon as the vehicle was on firm ground away from Chinese property.

He busied himself with his partner undoing the shackles that fastened the chain to both vehicles. "Chip'll disconnect the plug leads and take off the distributor cap, we'll take the rotor out too No one else is going to start the bastard on you then." Chip began to pull vital electrical equipment out of the engine."

The others stood by and watched. "Will you be wanting us again in the morning?" asked Tom.

"Yes, I will. I'm expecting forty rolls of inlaid lino first thing, and Don has to go out to an auction later." He looked across to the ruined market-garden. "What do those silly buggers want?" A group of Chinese men were shouting and pointing to indicate their damaged fowl shed which still stood, barely, but the back wall had been ripped out. They had already made an unavailing attempt to prop up the fence but it was too shattered and collapsed at once. They were shouting and pointing out the extent of this Sunday morning disaster.

"Are you blokes free for the rest of the day?" asked Barney. "I'll have to do something for them."

"We should get double time for working on the Sabbath," said Tom Neerim. "It's a day of rest, you know. Chip and me are regular churchgoers, we both went to be christened, then we were back again to get married, and they'll wheel us in for a last visit on our way to the cemetery."

Barney soon settled the question of penalty rates for Sunday work. "Alright," he said, when he had made his position clear. "Take what you want and fix it for them. O.K. John take it easy!" he shouted to the irate Chinese; "These velly nice fellers, they fix up better than new."

"Are you going to help?"

"Nup! like you said, it's the Sabbath, and no one pays me overtime. I'll leave you jokers to it. See you at six o'clock tomorrow morning. Here's a spare key to the joint, make sure you bar the doors, properly when you go, and the key locks up the forge."

"We won't be finished tonight, there's a hell of a lot of damage over there."

"Well, do what you can. If they can get the chooks locked up they'll only have to worry about the vegies. You can work on it again tomorrow. If you can fix up the fence they won't have to sit up at night chasing kids out of the place."

"We can take some timber out of Teddy's house."

"Yair, good idea."

The blacksmith had got his horses back. The two were prized Clydesdales, but they were not racers and had not even been able to outrace the old Hupmobile car. George had ridden one back and led the other. They were now in their stalls and had been cheered up with a nosebag each of food. He had made a small Sunday fire instead of the week-day one that was usually blazing on the hearth and was boiling a kettle while Barney was talking to the two men.

Chapter - 6

'Come in Barn!' he called when he heard him on the other side of the dividing wall. 'I'm jus' goin' to make some tea.'

O'Connell, a former drinker, but now teetotal, was never averse to a cup of tea and he particularly wanted to be on good terms with his landlord. He accepted a steaming cup and threw a horse rug over the anvil before sitting on it. It was Sunday and he was still wearing his best suit.

"How are the boys going to get timber to repair the fence? George asked.

"No big deal. They're pulling down the old Sturgess house as you know. They were wondering what to do with the roof and ceiling joists, and this solves part of their problem. They can use a lot of it for the chook shed and the frame for a new fence. We'll worry about the palings later."

"Well, Mrs Spear that lady you just engaged to do the bookwork was telling me she wants an office. The timber from the old house would do the job nicely I should think."

"Yair, that's not a bad idea. She's a terrible whinger, complaining all the time, but I could give her an office. It might shut her up and save a bit of money while I'm doing it."

After this George lapsed into a reminiscent mood. "Did I ever tell you how I come by this property?" he asked.

He had, several times, but O'Connell was not going to spoil his mood.

"No. George, old feller. How did you get hold of it?"

"Did you know there used to be a saw-mill here, since before the first war. It's gone now but you can still see traces of it here and there."

O'Connell knew that very well, but he was not going to say so. He had paid a solicitor to investigate the title and knew that the blacksmith owned it outright. What he did say was, "What happened to the saw-mill?"

"Ah, well, it went bad during the depression. Most businesses did in those days and one day, when things were really tough, it caught fire. All the buildings were burned up but the fire-brigade hosed down the stock of timber, and saved it. The insurance company was pretty suspicious about that fire and the investigators went over the wreckage with a fine tooth comb. They couldn't find nothing wrong, and in the end they had to pay out. No one was building in those days and no one wanted the timber, or the land so it just sat here vacant for a few years until I came along and bought it on six quid deposit and five quid a week. I must'a been mad. Times was really crook, but Mavis had a bit of money left by her mum and dad, so we scraped along on that."

"You built these bloody big sheds, 'didn't you!"

"Yair, well no one wanted the timber, it was a bit twisted. and the corrugated iron'd been lying out in the open for years, so I hired a carpenter to help me and we put them up between us "

"Did you have any trouble getting tenants."

"No, some blokes rented it as a hay and corn store during the war and did very well. Then petrol rationing ended and their business started to die, just as mine's doing now. It was vacant about six months until you come along."

Chapter – 7

The auction started at one o'clock Wednesday. The weather was warm and trying so Barney, who was already in shorts, soon stripped down to, singlet, boots and grey worsted socks; it was the garb he used to wear when stacking trucks with fruit during summers before the war. He also had a heavy leather apron that reached down to mid-calf. He wore it when working and insisted on retaining it when on the rostrum auctioneering. It had been presented to him by the blacksmith.

George's assistant had left the forge to learn panel beating. The blacksmith had no use for a second apron and even less prospect of getting an apprentice so he had given it to Barney.

By the time the sale had been going about an hour and a half Barney had reached his usual auction state, hot and red-faced. His frizzy black hair was damp with sweat and more sweat was running in rivulets over his face and dripping on to the auction sheets. Don and some of the dealers who had been recruited to help were working hard to show the goods for sale and then restack them when sold.

The retail department was closed and barred as usual but the two doors of the auction room were pushed open as far as possible to let in light and air. Even so heat and glare beat through the dusty skylight and corrugated iron roof meeting the heat of the crowd and warming everything unpleasantly.

Don intended one day to get up on the roof and paint the glass green to cut down the glare, but had not done so yet.

Unwary customers tripped over occasionally. They were picked up and comforted, or abused, depending on who found them.

Those attending the auctions put up with conditions of dust and heat philosophically. Discomfort was expected at Barney's auction sales but onlookers were more interested in picking

up undoubted bargains than worrying about their surroundings, and anyone not prepared to cross swords with the auctioneer when necessary would be better off in a more refined auction room.

Someone had just bid two pound ten shillings for a double bed with blackwood ends, complete with a wire mattress and rails. Barney was in a pained state when considering the price. "Look," he was saying, "It's like pulling teeth trying to get a decent bid out of you lot. What do I have to say to you so-called dealers to get you to make yourself a quid? Do I have to knock you down and put money in your pockets? Two pound ten for this nice blackwood bed, it's ridiculous. Show them the wire mattress, Don. That's it; let the dog see the rabbit. Look at that; the wire hasn't been pulled up an inch. It's the best bed we've had in for months and if it isn't worth ten quid of anybody's money it isn't worth a brass razoo. Come on, open your purses and let the moths have an airing. All I want is a few intelligent bidders round here with a few bob to spend and we'd all make a fortune."

There was another bid of £3. "Alright, I'm offered three lousy iron men. It's OK for you lot, you don't have to face the owner afterwards and tell him that was all he got for his bed, less commission." This was not strictly true, he had paid a pound for it at the door some days before, but no auctioneer would ever admit to satisfaction with any price received at auction.

"Oh, come on, Barney," said Manny Button, whose bid it was, "knock it down and stop magging on, otherwise we'll be here all night. You're getting senile."

"OK, Manny," said Barney graciously, ignoring the insult. "That's yours and if you don't get ten quid for it you shouldn't be in the business."

Right, next is lot 165 a wool mattress. This will do you, Manny, it'll go with the bed you just bought."

"Is it marked," enquired Button, peering suspiciously at the mattress; you know I don't buy any mattresses unless they're clean."

"As clean as a hound's tooth -- show him both sides, Don. There you are, a genuine Crystal mattress. You don't often find them as good as this; alright, start me at £5 someone."

There was no five pound bid forthcoming but a customer in the front row offered one pound. Barney promptly took a two pound offer from Manny Button, slipped in a £2.10 bid from the wall on his own account and then knocked it down to Button, over his protests, for £3. Barney stifled his protests by shouting him down. "Win 'em and wear 'em, Manny," he shouted. "You know it's cheap, I know it's cheap, why go on about it? At three quid I'm giving you money, and well you know it." This was true, so the buyer subsided.

The auction sale proceeded equably for a time and without argument. The dining suite from the man with the old car had its moment of attention. It was sold to Mimi Chandos, for eighteen pounds ten shillings after spirited bidding between her and another dealer during which Barney ran them both impartially until he was satisfied the suite had brought a reasonable auction price and there was still a profit in the deal for Mrs Chandos.

After a time they started to sell the furniture from the Sturgess house. Neither of the two contractors was at the sale; they were busy at the demolition site and had complete faith in Barney's honesty.

Barney had noted when Sturgess's furniture was still on the trucks that much of it was original and though marked by years of neglect and mistreatment the lines were still good and most pieces could be restored.

He was pushing this line and getting prices to please Neerim and Dowd when they came to the duchess chest praised by Tom Neerim. Barney glossed over the damages it had sustained

and after a short series of favourable remarks concerning its appearance and resale value it was knocked down for six pounds fifteen shillings to another dealer, Tommy Cave.

"OK," said Barney, "take it away." Don, and Manny Button laid the duchess chest on its back on a dining table with turned wooden legs just purchased by Cave.

"Right, the next lot is a fitted maple wardrobe with a lift off cornice." He was about to drone on but was interrupted by Cave who had been studying the underside of the duchess chest.

"Hold it, Barney! Hold it! That chest's got borer. It's rotten with it; look at the floor; if that isn't borer dust I'll eat it. You know I don't take stuff with borer. I withdraw my bid."

"That's bull dust you can see," retorted Don. "If there had been anything wrong I would have told you. No, Tommy, it's as clean as a whistle. Have a look afterwards and if it's got the borer you don't have to take it."

"No, no, that's borer dust alright. Keep the chest, I don't want it."

"I don't know what you're worried about, Tommy," was Barney's contribution. "If it has got the ant you can soon fumigate it with that pipe of yours."

"Never mind my pipe," answered Cave who smoked a short, foul calabash pipe and had heard all those jokes before. "I want to know about the duchess chest. I just don't buy furniture with borer, they'll infest my shop."

"Alright," answered Barney, conceding the point. "Haul it down, boys and let's have a look. Gawd, you strike some pests at these sales, don't you."

The men retrieved the chest from where it had been stacked and stood it on the platform. Don pulled out some drawers and inspected their backs and sides. "There you are," he remarked, justified. "Nothing there. I'll give you a deener for every borer you find in this piece of furniture."

"What about the dust on the floor?"

"It's from the runners. It's drawer dust yer mug! If you were as old as this chest you'd be leaking dust too. Look, you feel these runners inside. Some of them are worn down nearly a quarter of an inch. I mean to say you have to expect a bit of dust when you get that much wear."

Don's expression grew intent. He had been feeling the drawer runners as he talked and now had touched something unexpected lying there.

There was about three inches of space between the sides of the drawers and the inside of the duchess chest. The runners were that wide, like small shelves on which things could be hidden and forgotten. Generally one found blunt razor blades or empty lipstick cases; this time it was different. Don pulled out a dusty old linen bag which had a drawstring at the mouth firmly tied in a knot. Inside the bag he could feel the texture of paper.

Don knew he had done the wrong thing as soon as he pulled out the bag. Better to have said nothing and come back later on the quiet to have a good look, but it was too late now; everyone in the shed had seen what he had in his hand. They all craned forward to see the bag; and all had the same idea -- treasure trove. It was the dream of everyone who dealt in old furniture, to find valuable trinkets or money lost and forgotten.

"What have you got there, Donny?" enquired Tommy Cave eagerly.

"I dunno, old cock. It's a mystery bag; just a minute and I'll have a captain." After fumbling for a short time he undid the knot and tipped the contents of the bag on to the shabby top of the duchess chest. Out of the bag fell a roll of money held by a rubber band that was perished, and broke as soon as he picked at it. The roll contained a number of slowly uncurling, red coloured £20 notes; the face of a long dead king looked up from the musty paper.

Barney acted as hands reached out from the crowd to touch this wondrous money; they had never seen such old currency. "Monkey fingers, monkey fingers!" he cried warningly and

leapt off the cut down chair used as an auction rostrum. He slapped a few hands away, grabbed the notes and calmly got back on his chair.

"Thanks, Barney," said Tommy Cave, reaching out hopefully. "It's alright I'll take it with me."

"You'll take nothing!" replied Barney, making sure the bag was out of reach of any clutching fingers. "What makes you think I'd hand it over to you? I'm going to stick to this and don't think you're going to get your greasy paws on it."

"But it's mine!" exclaimed the dealer. "It's mine!" he repeated bobbing his head and gesticulating. "It was in the chest of drawers I just bought and that makes it my property. Don't try and put anything over on me, Barney. I'm a J.P. and I know the law. It's like buying a cow; if you buy the cow you buy her unborn calf too. Just hand it over and there won't be any trouble."

"An unborn calf, eh? Well, as soon as the old chest gives birth to a table call in and get your money."

"He's right, Barney." This was from Mimi Chandos. "Give him the money and let's get on with the sale." She was backed by Manny Button and one or two others.

Even now factions were beginning to form in the crowd. Button from his tremendous experience, real or imagined, started to tell an anecdote of a similar event that happened when he was an auctioneer at Christies in London.

"Give it to him," said Mrs Chandos. She was accustomed to sparring with Barney on matters of race, politics, and religion. Like his regular customers she took him at less than face value. "There's a principle involved here. The money belongs to Tommy because it was in his chest of drawers. Now, give it to him, Barney. You know he has the law on his side."

"He's got a lot of bull on his side," Don broke in. "He knocked the chest back because he reckoned it'd got the borer. I'm a witness for the persecution and I say he doesn't own the chest, or the money."

"Aw, pigs!" Tommy Cave was becoming heated. "What are you trying to get at, Don? Even if Barney does stick to the money illegally don't think you're going to get anything out of it; he's not that sort. Come on Barney, you're the richest man I know; why don't you give me what I'm entitled to? It's not much I'm asking because that chest was knocked down to me at auction and it's my property, and everything in it is my property too."

"Listen, Tommy, you can earbash me for a month of Sundays and it's not going to make any difference. You're not going to get a sniff of this bag, or anything in it. I don't know much about the law and I don't want to, but I do know you're not going to get this money because it's not yours. Now you can put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"He might be right," said Don thoughtfully. I remember Teddy Sturges bought the chest off us and Barney got it off a bloke who was going over to the West. He and his missus split up; she cleared out with someone else, I think, and she got off with most of his furniture. All she left was this old chest, a bed and a few kids. You remember, don't you, Barney? You bought everything from him, except the kids."

"It doesn't matter where the money came from, I'm sticking to it," announced Barney. "As far as I'm concerned -- up the lot of you! I've got nine points of the law on my side, and that's good enough for me."

He pulled the mouth of the bag tight with the money in it, wound the cord a few times around the neck and calmly stuffed it into his hip pocket. "And you pipe down too, Don, and let's get on with the auction. You're carrying on like a lot of old whores at a picnic just because

someone finds a bit of money. Just settle down and let's get on with it, otherwise we'll be here all day. Right, we're up to lot 225 a bow front maple robe with a lift off cornice; what am I bid?"

"Just a minute, just a minute!" shouted Cave, making another attempt to break through this stonewalling defence. "That isn't a little bit of money, it's a lot. You've got a big roll of notes there that might be worth hundreds of quid. I tell you, Barney," he roared, his short figure quivering with indignation and his cloth cap almost sliding off his bald pate. "I'm a Justice of the Peace, I know the law and I'm entitled to that money. Hand it over!"

Barney, from the height of the chair, looked down on Cave with contempt. "If a drongo like you can get to be a J.P. I should be Governor General. Gawd help us when a sawn-off jumped-up little runt like you can sit in a court of law ladling out half baked ideas and calling it justice."

"Steady, Barney, steady," said Manny Button soothingly, "this money may not be Tommy's but it's not yours either. How about handing it over to the police? let them work out who owns it."

Barney expressed his opinion of the police quite succinctly. He turned on Don. "Why couldn't you keep your big trap shut? You should've left the flaming stuff where it was?"

"Still can, Barn. No probs. We'll put it back and auction the chest over again, complete with contents."

Mimi Chandos had buttonholed the ex-Whitechapel dealer and was giving him advice. "Go to your solicitor, Tommy," she warned him. "It's the only way; you won't get any justice around here. If you want the name of a good man I'll tell you; but go to a solicitor and give him the full facts. Barney is not going to hand over the money whatever happens. If you want to go on with it see a legal man and find out where you stand."

No, no," she said, repressing him. "It's no use going on about being a J.P.; if this ever comes to court they won't let you sit on the bench so it won't do you much good, will it?"

"You wouldn't think everyone would carry on like this over a bit of money," observed Barney. "Just give them a sniff of it and good manners fly out the window."

"No, you're the only good mannered one here, aren't you, Barney? The only one that didn't act like a galah at the sight of a bit of loose dough lying around. You grabbed first and let everyone else get excited."

"Alright, Don, belt up," was the sour retort. "If we don't start selling again soon we're going to lose the mob. Come on, Mimi. Tell Tommy to pull his head in we've got work to do. Well. Ladies and Gentlemen, I might tell you that from now until the end of the sale there are quite a few items that came from the same place as the duchess chest, and they might have money in them too; you never know. But I tell you what we'll do, we won't look inside them; borer or not, money or not, you will have to take them where is and as is. Come on now, the money or the box?"

"Which ones are they?"

"That would be telling, Manny, and we're not saying. That's the charm of the whole deal. You pays your money and you takes your choice; but I'll give you a hint, the older and tattier it is the more likely it is to have come from the same place."

"You're all witnesses!" shouted Tommy Cave suddenly. He's saying now exactly what I was saying; if you buy furniture and there's anything in it it's yours. I'm going to take you to court over this, Barney, and I've got all these witnesses on my side."

"Yair, do that. Make the bloody lawyers rich; but it's not going to do you a bit of good. It's about time you woke up to the golden rule, Tommy - 'keep away from lawyers'. But if you

won't learn from being told find out for yourself. Now, as I said before, lot 225 a bow front maple robe. Come on, Don, start throwing yourself round a bit. I want to get home before midnight, even if you don't."

The crowd packed into the shabby old building had been deeply stirred at the sight of the discovered treasure and its rapid annexation by the auctioneer. After this extraordinary event they were difficult to quieten and the excited conversations almost drowned out Tommy Cave who was addressing his colleagues trying to organize a mass walkout of dealers to punish Barney. He had little success, they were divided in their sympathies, there was a fellow feeling for him but they had come to the auction to do business and the fact that Barney had been quicker off the mark than anyone else was his good luck.

After the first excitement big Dan Altdorp and Fred Dorman, two dealers, had ignored Tommy Cave and bid closely when Barney resumed the auction. For about thirty lots afterwards they were able to take turns in buying the goods offered. While the dispute over the money raged in the background they had only the auctioneer to contend with. He was staging a counter demonstration by selling vendor's goods cheaply and his own at reasonable prices.

It was not long before the rest of the crowd realized what was happening and resumed paying attention. Tommy Cave's partisans soon deserted him and he was left to walk forlornly out of the place on his own while ruminating on various legal matters relating to treasure trove and the ownership of property.

Chapter - 8

After the sale was over, and while Don and Barney were sorting out who got what, they had another visitor, Freddy came sauntering in. He gone to some trouble with his appearance and was dressed in clothes they had not seen before.

"G'day, Barn. G'day Don." he said in greeting.

He was fashionably dressed in a tartan coat with velvet lapels. The colour of his shirt may have been ill-advised because it was bright green but his trousers were purple. The socks were tartan and the shoes, blue suede.

The young man seemed complacent as though sure his outfit would make a good impression and he had not spared the Brilliantine when dressing his hair.

Barney surveyed him sardonically. "Gawd, look at that. The bloody things you see when you haven't got a gun. What do you want here Freddy? Can't you see we're busy?"

"I come to see you, Barn. I got a proposition for you."

"A proposition! A snotty nosed kid like you with a proposition Go away, will'ya, we're busy. Go on, go back to school where you belong. Tell your teacher we hate the sight of you."

"Can't go to school," Freddy replied cheerfully, ignoring the insults. "They kicked me out cos I was a bad influence in class. I been expelled. That's why I come to see you."

"Well, I'm not going to give you a reference so they'll take you back again, you can forget that."

No, I'm finished with all that education rubbish. School's a bitch; anyway, the old man kicked me out too. He says he won't let me in the house again until I get a job. So I thought I'd come down and see you."

"Yair," said Barney cautiously. "What's all this leading up to?"

"I want a job with you as assistant storeman. Poor old Don, here, he's working his insides out keeping this place going. Why don't you give him a break and take me on? I'm a bloody hard worker, y'know."

"That'll be the day," retorted Barney. "I'll keep you in mind; if the war starts again and they want tank drivers you'll be the first I'll send for."

"No, look Barn, fair dinks I need a job. I put on me best clobber to come and see yer and I want to get into the second-hand game and auctions, and all that stuff. How about givin' a man a chance?"

"He'd be alright," said Don. "You need someone in the place when we're both out and Freddy could do it as well as anyone. Maggie will be here to look after the paper-work." Maggie was Mrs Spear the lady who had a part time job doing office work without an office. Don continued, "we can get rid of his bag of fruit in the next auction. One of the country blokes might buy it to dress up a scarecrow."

Freddy looked down in some surprise at the maligned suit and felt the lapels to make sure they still graced the coat. All was well, his garments were as fashionable and tasteful as ever. "Don's right," he said, "You need me to help out; what happens if you both have to go out at the same time. And Don too, you're working the poor bugger into the ground. Why don't you give him a break?"

"What are you talking about? Don wouldn't work in an iron lung; if I was thirty years younger I'd show both of you what hard work was really like. Now, go on Freddy, there's no job for you here. Just bugger off and leave us to get on with it."

"You need a top class salesman here," Freddy persisted, "and an assistant auctioneer. I could do all that on me ear -- why don't you give us a chance?"

"You can't get a job here because I don't want trouble. You're trouble, Freddy and that I can do without. Now, out!" He gestured with his thumb towards the door.

"Aw - come on, Barn, have a heart. I could do this place a lot o' good. Y'can't get rid of me that easy."

"Yair, when I want a few more fences flattened I'll send for you. Until then don't hang around; people might think you belong here and that'd give the place a bad name."

"I'll be back tomorrow," said Freddy. "To see if you've still got shit on the liver; you might be easier to talk to; if you were any sort you'd give me a job."

"Go on, clear off while your luck's in."

Freddy departed grumbling. He was not the first or last person to be ordered out of Barney's establishment. Barney supervised everything and was chronically suspicious that customers might knock something over and break it or do other damage. It was not common, even then, for shop-keepers to order customers out of the shop, but Barney did it from time to time, his reasons varied.

He had painted a few no smoking signs around the place, he hated smokers, partly because he was a reformed smoker himself but mostly because the dry old building in which he operated was crammed with stock and a carelessly thrown match could ruin him. The surreptitious striking of a match or the smell of cigarette smoke would cause him to burst out in a tirade of abuse and order that either the culprit or the cigarette should be put out.

The sound of cupboard doors being slammed by someone inspecting with a view to purchase would have the same effect. If anyone tried to beat down his prices, or if he suspected they had no money, or were not serious about purchasing his goods they were promptly put out on the footpath.

Other actions would set him off. Sometimes he would be in a mellow mood and nothing would happen for weeks but there were enough incidents like this to make life interesting for his staff and customers who happened to be around at the time.

However the business was never short of customers, despite those who were ordered out or stamped out in a rage. His goods were in great demand and those who were prepared to stand up to him or answer back generally came to a good understanding with the man. He had faithful customers who came back repeatedly for entertainment as much as bargains.

Chapter – 9

Tom Neerim and Chip Dowd had promised to come in about one o'clock but for the morning they were hard at work wrecking the house. Any desirable or saleable material and fittings had to be got out before they were vandalized or stolen. A derelict, empty house was an open invitation for thieves and vandals.

A notice was nailed to the front gate and another to the telephone pole at the end of the street; it was a scrawled message that announced

'WRECK HOUSE DOORS WINDOWS JOINRY FOR SALE'

This sign enticed in a small number of bargain hunters and the front door was sold complete with letter slot, wrought iron knocker and the red glass surround which gave rosy tinge to the passage. They got ten pounds for that and another pound for delivery.

Later they sold the veranda posts which were uprooted and delivered after a tremendous effort and some danger from the collapsing veranda canopy, which had to be propped up with timber. Chip Dowd was nearly spiked by the fall of the cast iron frieze but received only a few grazes which he was able to ignore.

Later on, if not sold on the spot, they would rip up the architraves and timber mouldings to smuggle them into one of the auctions. They did not know if Barney would accept flooring, and doors, joinery and windows for sale, but Don would.

Freddy had the job of ripping down the lath and plaster interior of the rooms and carting the debris out to be burned on a bonfire in the back yard.

On the first day an old man who lived in the house next door came in to watch and, because the weather was mild, he stayed a long time to reminisce on the changes he had seen in the district over the years. Later, to shut him up, they appointed him billy boy and Freddy gave him some scrap timber and the old black billy to make morning tea. The old man claimed, amongst other things, that once, years ago, he had been a bushman a miner and an expert maker of billy tea.

"You should swing the billy hard, round and round, when it starts to boil," he said. "It tastes better that way when the leaves are properly infused, but don't slow down at the top of the swing. You'll have a shower of boiling tea if you do that. It won't do your head much good. You'll have to do the swinging, Freddy, I'm too long in the tooth now. Old age is a bugger, and not for weaklings."

In the back-yard was a healthy young sapling that would presently be a victim of progress. It yielded up gum-leaves and twigs to give the tea that proper tang so prized by bushmen.

"That's not a bad brew, Albert, thanks," said Tom Neerim, sipping a cup of tea the old man had passed him.

"I knocked off some of me granddaughter's biscuits and a bottle of milk. Just as well she's out for the day! She'd be as mad as a wet hen if she knew I was sitting out here with you blokes eating her biscuits. I dunno, a man can't do anything these days; she's always following me round wanting me to sit down or take a nap, or something!"

I don't like going to bed, you know. People die in bed. Every time I wake up in the morning and find myself in bed I think, 'Gawd! they've got me, I'm a goner!' and I hop out of bed as quick as lightning. Me, I'd like to be shot by a jealous husband; there's no better way to go."

"Ah, turn it up, Pop!" said Chip Dowd, "You'd give a man the heebie jeebies. A young bloke like you shouldn't talk about dying."

"I dunno. You'll start thinking about it yourself when you get to my age. Though poor old Teddy Sturgess was too busy to give it a thought until right up to the end. Did you know Teddy? He wasn't a bad old stick. Me and him had an interest in a gold mine but he up and died on me. He was a bit cracked, you know. Always going on about the government, and the church, and communism, and the yellow peril, and the depression, and Gawd knows what else. I reckon he was the champion ear-basher I ever met in me life."

"Champion ear-basher, was he?" said Chip I bet the championship wasn't any walkover; not with you around."

Albert ruminated for a while as everyone sat round sipping their tea and gazing pensively at the fire. "I'll tell you something that will interest you," he said.

"I knew Tommy Bent; that dates me a bit doesn't it? Tommy's been in his grave many years now but he was Premier of the State for a while and Mayor of Brighton quite a few times. I could tell you a few stories about Tommy if we had the time. They say he was a dairy farmer for a while when things got crook and he lost his seat in parliament. But he bounced back, and later in life he never passed a cow without raising his hat to it. He said cows fed him and his family in the bad years so it was only right to be polite to them."

"His suburb was proud of him too; he was a good man for his city. After he died they put up that statue of him down on Point Nepean Road. Did you notice the way he's got his hand held out as though you could slip something into it? They say that was about right for old Tom. Though round Christmas time someone would put a beer bottle in his hand, and that was right for Tom too."

After a lot more of this the two contractors managed to impress on the old man that morning tea was over and it was time to go back to work. "Thanks for the history lesson old feller, and tell your granddaughter, 'thanks for the milk and biscuits.'"

"Don't you worry about that; I'm not goin' to say nothin'. She'd have me guts for garters if she knew I was letting you blokes get stuck into her biscuits. Anyway it'll be alright; she'll think the grand-kids have been at them and won't say nothin'. Me grand-daughter and her husband and kids are living here because they can't get a house or flat and its like bloody hell turned loose sometimes. You should have heard them going on when I gave one of the kids a whack over the ear-hole; cheeky little bugger! that's why I'm glad of the chance to clear out and find some-one to talk to."

"I wonder who winds him up," said Chip when the two men were safely up amidst the oregon skeleton of the old roof now stripped of its slates. "He goes on like a married magpie. I couldn't get a word in edgeways and I wanted to find out what Jim said in his letter."

That morning Tom had received a letter from a friend who had migrated to Queensland to grow pineapples, but the old man's non-stop talk had put a stop to any discussion of the letter's contents.

His rheumatism wouldn't let him climb to the roof, and join them. By sitting down out of sight on what was left of the plaster ceiling, and the ceiling joists, they had privacy and a peace which was not available on the ground.

Tom produced the letter from his hip pocket. "I'll read it aloud. I think I got it all, but my reading is about as good as Jim's writing. I think some of the words are spelt wrong too, but I got the gist of it all."

They could hear Freddy in the house knocking out the plaster and timber of the inside walls but it did not disturb the two men.

The letter was ill-written but Tom managed to work out without too much difficulty what it was all about, he read-

"Dear Tom, well here I am up on the farm like I told you I would be. How are you hows Chip me old china and all your famlys. It's a very nice place I got here 500 acres not far from the coast with a view over the ocean and the sweetest land you ever seen in your life. Don't think its easy Tom, its not and I never expected it to be. You don't get anything free in this world without hard yakka, and that's what I got. I often think of you and Chip when I'm working away here I wish you were here so we could make a go of this place between us and that is mainly why I am writing to you. Why dont you and Chip up stakes and come up to Queensland and join me Bring your famlies and your furniter because theres another house on the block and you can have the biggest one. I tell you take me up on this and we will split the profit three ways and when you can aford it Ill sell you a third share each in the land. I've tried employing labour and it just dont work. I know you blokes dont know much about farming, but I been a cocky all my life, except when I was working in the city with you, and so was my old man before me. We can make a go of it, dont worry about that. Dear Tom rite and let me know what you decide. If you don't want to be in it I'll have to sell some of the land or else move to a smaller place. I just can't run a big block like this on me own. Hoping to hear a favorable reply, Yours, Jim."

Tom put the letter back in his pocket and they sat quietly for a minute musing on the dream of 500 acres of sun-drenched pineapples in far off Queensland.

"What do you think?"

Chip shrugged. "Sounds alright. Jim said it himself, and I think he's right, it looks like bloody hard yakka to me. We'd have to work like thrashing machines from daylight to dark playing nursemaid to a bunch of pineapples."

"We're doing the daylight to dark bit as it is," said Tom, "Only this might pay better; and if we can buy a share from Jim at least we'll own something. The way we're going now we'll end up on the bone of our backside not owning anything. I've always wanted to go on the land. I reckon it'd be alright being a cocky, and I've been thinking about it and I'd like to take Jim up on his offer. The girls are alright too. I don't think they'd mind being on a farm. Though Jim'd have to move out of his house and live in a tent, or a shed."

"Why would he do that?"

"To keep the peace. We can't expect two women, and two families, to live together in one house and not fight."

"The girls would get on alright, if the house was big enough. They're mates."

"They'd fight like cat and dog," retorted Tom decisively; "You can't have two women and their kids living under the same roof, it wouldn't work out, it never has, and there's no way you'd get two women to share the one kitchen. I tell you what, if we do go up, Jim would have to give us both houses and we could build him a humpy of his own to live in."

"It's a bit rough isn't it to tell a man who owns two houses that he's being tipped out of both of them."

"Him being a bachelor it wouldn't matter so much. It's no use arguing about it, mate. I suppose the place is lousy with snakes too, which is a thing I hate. But, alright, if you're interested, I'll get Marie to write back and ask him about the houses and get some more details. Anyway the girls will want to know how far away the schools and shops are from the property. Jim wouldn't think about a thing like that unless you asked him."

Having got to this point, the men thoughtfully resumed their labours on the dismemberment of the old house while their billy boy waited down below ready to resume his monologue at the first opportunity.

Whenever they were working in the district, the two men had the habit of visiting McWhinney's pub for a while before going home. It was close to Barney's Auction and they would meet Don, the storeman and any other cronies who had happened to gather for a drink before the hotel closed at six.

They parked their tip-truck out the front and went in after a sharp verbal exchange with Freddy. He was going to march into the pub with them but they ordered him to clear off. Being under age, not yet twenty one, there was no way he would be served a drink and McWhinney would be in trouble with the police if he was seen on the premises. He made a number of rude gestures and shouted insults at them as they pushed their way into the noisy bar.

Don was already there, standing back from the crowd and thoughtfully sipping his beer. He was still thinking about the money in the chest.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said he when the two contractors appeared at the door. "Come into the office; I think there are some refreshments available." Don quickly finished his glass and held up three fingers to the barman above the heads of the other drinkers whose noise made ordering difficult except by sign language. All the drinkers were men packed closely round three sides of the rectangular bar, drinking, talking, shouting, or calling for more beer before 6 o'clock struck, at which time they would be ejected from the hotel.

"How did the auction go? Did you do any good with our stuff?"

"Yair, pretty good. You'll be pleased with the prices but you should'a been there. We haven't had so much excitement since Ma got her tits caught in the mangle." He got three drinks from a barman, scarcely spilling any on the other patrons as they were passed across.

"You remember that old chest? The one you said needed a coat of boot polish? Well, it was loaded, mate, loaded." He drank some of his beer. "I found a bag full of money in it, must'a been well over a hundred quid in all, or maybe even two hundred."

"Go on! Why didn't you count it?"

"Didn't have a chance. Barney got the lot, he grabbed it so quick my head's still spinning."

"Well that's our dough, if it was in our furniture it must be ours. We'd better come round tomorrow and see Barney about it."

"You'll be busy, my Gawd, you'll be busy! Anyone that wants to get money off Barney has to get up pretty early to do it; he chucks it around like a man with no arms."

"We're entitled to it, aren't we?"

"I dunno about that, but if you want it you'll have to join the queue. Tommy Cave, he's one of the dealers, nearly had a baby on the spot, he reckoned the money was his. He'd just bought the chest at auction and knocked it back because he thought it had borer. Jeez, he went off like a packet of crackers when I found the money and Barney hopped in and took it right from under his nose."

"What's it got to do with him? If it's our chest, then it's our money."

"Ah, yes, but you try and get Tommy and Barney to see it that way. Tommy says he bought the chest and he bought what was in it too; and don't forget, the news is going to spread. When Teddy's heirs hear about this, they'll be down here with their tongues hanging out. You know what they say - 'Where there's a will there are relatives.' I don't know who's entitled to the money but whatever happens it's going to be a real balls up."

"We got some evidence on our side too. Ken Wilkie, the solicitor told us we could have anything valuable in the house. You heard him, didn't you, Chip?"

Chip nodded his assent to this query. "I'll get up in court and say it if I have to - it's true!"

Don was doubtful about Chip's quality as a witness. "That may be," he said "But something tells me Wilkie's going to have a shocking lapse of memory when you try and remind him about what he said. Another thing too, Barney owned that chest once; he bought it from a bloke that was shooting through to the West. Perhaps the money belongs to this character; it might even belong to Barney."

"Honestly Don, what do you think our chances are of getting it from him?"

"You got Buckley's, mate. In fact you got two chances, Buckley's and Nunn. There's only one thing Barney loves, apart from the Pope, and that's money. I reckon he'd crawl past Marlene Dietrich to get to a quid note."

The two contractors talked for a while of the possibility of making Barney see reason in the matter of handing over the money, but received little encouragement from Don. After a while, with refilled glasses in their hands they wandered out of the front door of the bar away from the noise and oppressive body heat, on to the broad front veranda facing the road.

There were a few wooden forms set against the front wall of the aging pub where they seated themselves and gazed at the passing traffic.

They knew that it would not long remain like this. The rumour was that the brewery was going to put up the money so McWhinney could enlarge and improve the place. The veranda would be knocked down to make more room for car-parking. They had heard that the structure was to have a brick skin put on the outside and the ground floor area would be enlarged to make more bar space.

"Kath O'Connell still wants to work with us. She made her old man hire some pest control people and they sprayed the insides of the sheds on Saturday, after we closed, and told us not to go into the place again until Monday."

"Did it work? Did it get rid of the spiders?"

"I think so. Kath came in on Monday and had a look round, and said she was going to work with Maggie. But Barney'll get the rounds of the kitchen if he doesn't supply an office. You blokes could build one for her. But don't hold your breath, Barney hasn't been told yet about her plan to join the work force."

"Thanks Don, and good luck with Kath, but don't forget, Barney would make a hell of a father in law."

Don went red at this remark, but did nothing to belittle the thought of being related to Barney by marriage.

It was Chip's shout and he went into the bar carrying the glasses for a refill.

Tom changed the subject. "We're thinking of moving to Queensland," he said. "A mate of ours who's running a pineapple farm up there wrote and said he'd like us to come and join him."

"Are you going?"

"I dunno, we're thinking about it. Five hundred acres, that's a bloody lot of pineapples. It's on the coast highway with a view of the sea. I've never seen it but old Jim, he's the owner and an old mate of ours up there, sent a couple of post-cards and letters."

"Have you known him for long?"

"We knew him before the war. Later he was with our mob in New Guinea, and a dead shot with a rifle. He killed more Japs than the rest of us put together."

"Queensland's a long way away. How would you get there?"

"The old International tipper should do the job; and now we've got Teddy's old Dodge; between them they should haul our stuff to Queensland."

"I wouldn't back them to haul you home," retorted Don. "What happens if they break down on the way? You'll be stranded out in the back blocks somewhere with a load of women and kids and furniture. You'd be stuffed."

"Yair, we know. That's why it'd be beaut if we could get that dough off Barney. See what you can do for us will you, Don."

Chapter – 10

While the men were chatting on the verandah of the pub Barney and the blacksmith were also talking. They were sitting by the forge before going home for the night.

"Yes," Barney was saying, "I hate the markets. I always go there of a Friday with the missus for our fruit and vegies. We go to the Vic. market but I don't care for it much, it's only because the stuff's cheap."

You know I was brought up on a pile of cabbage leaves at the markets. I can never go round any of those places and smell the vegies and horse dung without thinking of the old man. He had a fruit stall at the market and that's why I haven't got any particular behind to speak of now, on account of the old man worked it off me when I was a kid. He was the hardest man I ever knew; I'd work like a dog for him all day and then get a clip over the ear for me trouble.

When I was old enough though I fixed him. One time we were loading melons on to a truck. I had to throw them up so he could stack them. Well, he was swearing at me because I was throwing them wrong, or short, or something. He kept telling me to throw them at his nose -- that's the way you do it, you know -- if you're tossing stuff to someone aim for the nose, it's always up to the other joker to catch what you're throwing at him. Well, I got jack of this, I was about fifteen at the time and pretty strong, so I picked out a nice firm melon and let him have it right between the eyes, just as hard as I could. Lucky for both of us there was a pile of hessian bags on the other side of the truck because I knocked him over backwards, arse over tit and he landed on the back of his neck on the bags. He was alright afterwards, the swelling on his nose went down after a week or two and they let him out of hospital, but I took off; I didn't wait around to find out what was going to happen."

It was years before I ever spoke to him again. I used to go home during the day and see Mum; but the old man, no; I couldn't have him on at any price. We both got over it in the end and I think he forgave me; but we were never what you would call close. Shooting through like that didn't do me any harm though; I owned four fruit shops by the time I was twenty one."

"Yair, and your business here is going like the clappers too. You'll have to take on extra staff, just to keep ahead of the game."

"Well, me daughter Kathleen has made up her mind at last. She wants to work here. But I don't want her in the place. She can be a bloody nuisance."

"I seen her once on your first day here, she didn't like the spiders, they've never worried me, but she seemed a nice kid"

"Yair, she made me pay to have the place deloused. I'd sooner have the spiders than the money it cost. But how are you getting on?"

"Not too good. If it wasn't for the Chows and their wagons and horses I'd be out of work by now," said George. They grow vegies and stuff then go out in the wagons, knocking on doors and selling to everyone they can. Charley Wing was telling me the other day they had enough money now to go back to China and live like emperors."

"Doesn't sound like a good idea from where I'm sitting, there's fighting going on over there. Oh well, it's their business.

Barney looked at some unfinished work leaning against the wall. "I see your knocking up a pair of steel gates for someone. Why don't you get into that line. Forget the horses and advertise that you're an expert in wrought iron. Gates and such made to order."

"Oh yair, I'm still a tradesman, a pretty good one too, even if I say so meself. I could set up in the wrought iron business, make ornaments, gates, and stuff like that. But I dunno, I'm too old for that sort o' caper."

"Well, why not sell out and retire? I told you before I'll buy you out if the price is right. Just tell me what you want."

"Yair, I know, and I've talked it over with Mavis. She said if we can get five thousand pound for the property we could sell."

"Of course you'd sell if a buyer was mad enough to offer you five thou. Anyone would sell at that price. For five thousand quid I could buy a mansion in Brighton. Instead we're talking about the block of land we're sitting on."

"It's built on. Don't forget that."

"Built on, yair, three bloody clapped out old sheds. We're talking land value here, the sheds are worth nothing Look, I'm paying you four quid a week for two sheds, throw in the forge for, say, another two. That'd be six quid a week or three hundred and twelve pounds a year, right?"

"I dunno," said the blacksmith. "I'd need a pencil and a piece of paper to work that out."

"Believe me George, it's right. Now, in ten years you'll have collected three thousand one hundred and twenty pounds off me. But you don't have to wait ten years. If you say yes I'll buy it at that price and give you a ten percent deposit by the end of next week, and the balance in full at thirty days."

"There's no doubt about you, Barney," said Mr Wilson admiringly, "once you get going you could talk the leg off an iron pot; I dunno what to do. What you're saying sounds alright, and Mavis has been on to me about retiring."

"Yair, do that, Look at it this way," said Barney. "You're a man like me that's worked hard all his life. Now you want to retire and have a little bit of comfort. But you can't get the pension, not the full pension anyway, because you've got two properties in your name. Now you still owe on your house, don't you?"

The blacksmith nodded.

"Alright; I'll put thirty one hundred and twenty cash for this joint into your hot little mitt, and kiss ya goodbye. No argument, you can have it clear and I'll pay legal costs and anything else. Now, with the money you pay off the balance owing on the house, you get new furniture, you and the missus get your teeth and specs fixed up, maybe you even have a little holiday. You spend enough so that you're just inside the limit. It wouldn't hurt to have a new car, maybe even

give a bit to the kids. You can have your own house and car, and so much in the bank and then you can apply for the pension. You get that my boy and you're sitting pretty, everything's taken care of and you've got an income for the rest of your life."

"What you're saying is quite right, but I'd like to have a property to leave to the kids. They're good kids and I want to do the right thing by them."

"Blow the kids! You look after yourself! You should know how it is; two parents can look after ten kids, but ten kids can't look after two parents. Besides you'll be leaving them the house, and if you've got any sense it'll be clear of all debt; they'll fight over that just as much as they will over this block of land here."

"It's a hard decision," said the blacksmith. "You're offering a good price now but property is rising in value all the time; if I stick to it it'll be worth a lot more in a few years."

"Of course it will; you don't think I'm a bloody dill, do you? If I was to offer you that price in ten years time you'd laugh at me. But don't forget, you might not be around in ten years. By that time you might be pushing up daisies and your kids will be fighting like cat and dog over the property. You take it now while you can still enjoy it. You've been bashing away at the anvil all your life, but at your age you're going to find the hammer harder to lift every year. It's about time you had a bit of peace and quiet to do what you want to do."

The blacksmith paused and came to a decision. "O.K. Barney, I think you're right. Mum and me could use a bit of the folding stuff right now. You give me three and a half thou. as well as paying all legal costs and we'll call it quits. I can't sell the blacksmith business so I'll just shoot through and leave it, you can have the lot."

I didn't say three and half thou. I said three thousand, one hundred and twenty.'

No, it was me said three and a half, and I meant it. You're a good bloke, Barney, but I can't give away our future. I have to think of Mavis if she's left on her own. It's Sydney or the bush, Barney. Three and a half thousand and it's yours."

"Done!" said Barney. He fished a roll of notes from his pocket, not the money found in the chest, and peeled off £100 which he counted and handed over. "There's a preliminary deposit to show we're both serious. You'll get the rest of the deposit by the end of the week. We'll go down tomorrow morning first thing and see Wilkie, the lawyer man and he can fix everything up."

"Righto Barney, it's a deal. I'll get a pen and write you out a receipt."

"No, don't bother. If you were going to take me down over a lousy hundred smackers you'd do it whether I got a bit of paper off you or not. A handshake's good enough for me, old feller. Just you front up here tomorrow morning at eight o'clock and we'll get this thing underway."

"Do you mind me asking what you're going to do with the place."

Wilson was a little forlorn after suddenly deciding to sell; his impulsive decision meant that the old sheds in which he felt comfortable were no longer his. He was not normally a decisive man and had been taken aback at the way events had suddenly speeded up, but there was no turning back. The hundred pounds was in his pocket and there was no way of returning it, even if he wanted to.

Barney paused and thought about the question. Things had suddenly speeded up for him too. He knew the blacksmith had been wavering but had not expected to buy the property off him that very night. "I haven't thought much about what I'll do with it," he mused. "I suppose I'll just get more stock in and work a bloody sight harder. I won't alter the joint much, though I

suppose I might knock out some of the inside walls and turn it into one big shed. The outside's alright, I'll leave it as it is."

Wilson had doubts about the last part of this statement. Though not a fussy man he was aware of the deficiencies of his building and had been troubled for some time at the thought of the expense involved in knocking it down and rebuilding. There was no way it could pass any tests regarding appearance, safety, or convenience. However, if Barney was prepared to take the ramshackle building as it was without any demands as to renovation or alteration he was not going to argue on the subject.

Chapter - 11

At ten past nine the following morning Wilkie, the solicitor, arrived at his office to find two unusual clients in the waiting room.

The two men had been waiting for the office to open since a quarter past eight. It was incomprehensible to Barney that anyone could start work after eight thirty at the very latest. Just as it was impossible for him to believe that Don could open up for trade and settle down efficiently to a day's work without him. By the time ten past nine and the solicitor arrived together he was as impatient as he had ever been and as Wilkie came up the stairs he could hear the blacksmith being harangued on the total uselessness of people who couldn't get out of bed in the morning and arrive at work at a reasonable hour.

"You've come about the treasure trove," suggested Wilkie when he encountered them. Wilkie had met Barney before and the story about having found money in the old duchess chest had spread rapidly. Even the Public Solicitor's office had been telephoned about the incident in the auction room and had already begun to press the claims of the Sturgess estate.

"Forget it," growled Barney. "The money's all right where it is, now I've got some work for you to do. If you'd get up in the morning and attend to your business instead of staying on the nest maybe we could get something done. Now look, I'm buying George Wilson's property from him, it's those old sheds on the main road." He thrust a piece of pink paper with writing on it into the hands of the solicitor. "I'm paying him three and a half thousand clear. I gave him a hundred quid cash last night and this is a cheque for three thousand four hundred quid for the balance; and I'm going to pay you separately."

Wilkie studied the cheque. It was difficult to read and looked as though the mythical inky spider had been crawling across it. He had no reason to suspect that the cheque was not good. Barney had the reputation of being a wealthy man and apparently had enough funds to cover this cheque if nothing else.

"I take it you want me to act for both parties," he said.

"That's what we're here for. You needn't think we're going to pay out for two lots of lawyers. You can do the job for both of us. Now you know the address. It's George Wilson's property down on the main road that I'm buying. Come on, get the girl to type out the deed, or whatever you call it, and we can both get back to work. We haven't got all morning to waste even if you have. Some of us have even been known to start work before half past nine in the morning."

The solicitor shook his head. "You can't do it this way because it's not as simple as you think - the law's delays, you know. I can certainly issue you with a receipt for the cheque and put it into my trust fund until the matter is settled, whereupon I can issue my own cheque to Mr Wilson, less the usual fees of course."

Barney soon made it clear to the solicitor that whatever went into his trust fund it would certainly not be that cheque. "Don't start worrying about your dough, and don't think you're going

to get your claws on this cheque. Just hand it over to Mr Wilson; I'm buying the property off him, not you. You just send me a bill when this is all over, and don't make it too hot either."

Annoyed by his latest client the solicitor tried to explain why buying a property was different and more complicated than buying five hundred baths or a gross of jig-saw puzzles. It was in vain; all his life Barney had had the habit of going straight towards his objective regardless of obstacles, and the difficulties of the law were not for him. He lumped the law and the government together as devices for destroying initiative and progress. His suspicions and prejudices had been strong before he went into the public service to do his bit for the war-effort; when it was all over there was no shaking his belief that the country was in the hands of poltroons and idiots, abetted by the law and its custodians.

Mr Wilkie sighed and tapped on the surface of his desk with his fingers. "What about insurance?" he said. "We will have to transfer Mr Wilson's insurance policy into your name as soon as possible. Otherwise there will be a nasty gap when you will have no cover whatever."

"It ain't insured," said the blacksmith helpfully. "Have you had a look at the joint lately. No insurance company'd touch it with a dung fork."

The solicitor took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He felt tired already, and it was still morning. He thought that he may as well ask the question. "I take it that your stock is fully insured, Mr O'Connell?"

"No, it's not!"

"I suppose that this is another of the things you don't believe in?"

"That's right, I won't have a bar of insurance: Bludgers! I'll carry it meself."

"Public risk policy?"

"What's that?"

"It's an insurance cover you should have and you could be in a very nasty position if someone was to have an accident on the property? They would look to you for damages and if you have no public risk policy you are liable for the full amount. And without fire insurance, if the place was to catch fire, you could lose everything"

"They'll have to get it off me first; anyway, if anyone falls arse over turkey in my place and hurt themselves they deserve anything that happens to them."

"The law may have a different view."

"I tell you, no insurance salesman sets foot on to my property. Anyway what's all this about? I didn't come here to talk insurance. All we want is a bit of paper to say that the property is mine and then we'll go."

"My duty as your advisor is to warn you that without insurance of any kind you are in a very dangerous situation."

"Well you've done it; now let's get on with the important part of the business!"

Barney listened impatiently to the explanation of why neither he nor the solicitor, nor anyone else could shorten the gestation period demanded by the law and the intricacies of the civil service before any transfer of land or property could take place.

Finally Mr Wilson, who had some influence over his friend, was able to persuade him that he could not complete the purchase of the the property that very day. All that he was going to get on the spot was a receipt signed by Mr Wilson when Barney insisted on handing him a cheque for the balance of the purchase price.

"I don't know anything about the law," the purchaser of the property stated, with a sort of perverse pride, "But I know about blacksmiths. He may be a silly old bugger but he's not going

to take me down; I'd trust him with double the amount. He's like me, he's honest: that's been our trouble all our lives."

The subject of the money that had been found in the old duchess chest came up several times but with little success; Barney's reaction to this topic was discouraging. Finally the solicitor let the matter drop convinced that if the Sturges estate was going to get any of the treasure trove it would have to take court action, and even so there would be easier projects than trying to prise money away from Barney O'Connell.

The solicitor turned to the blacksmith. "Now Mr Wilson you have the money, but before we can do anything else we're going to require the title deeds of the property. Can you go to your bank today and get them out of safe-keeping?"

"They're not at the bank. Last time I saw them they were stuck behind the clock on the mantelpiece. I'll have to ask me missus: she's a terror for chuckin' away old papers she reckons we don't need any more."

"You didn't put them in a safe place?"

"Well, behind the clock's a safe place, except when the missus decides to throw things out. She's been goin' a bit funny lately - she threw out some money once, never did get it back. You know what women are like when they're gettin' on a bit."

"You'll just have to find those papers!" said the solicitor shaking his head. "Otherwise there are going to be awful complications; please, Mr Wilson, do what you can. If we don't find the title deeds to the property it is going to be a long, complicated and expensive business."

"All he needs is an affidavit to say he lost the damn things," interposed Barney, showing an unexpected knowledge of legal terminology. "Everyone knows he owns the place, there's no argument about it."

"That's right," agreed Mr Wilson, "you ask anyone around here and they'll tell you I own the property. Barney'll swear to it in court. He pays me the rent every fortnight in advance. He wouldn't do that if I didn't own the place."

"It doesn't matter about common knowledge," retorted the solicitor, "the documents are all important - we must have them!"

"Alright," said Barney, "you had better have a good scratch around tonight to see if you can find them. And give your missus a few back-handers too, see if you can thump the truth out of her."

"Without advocating those extremes," said the solicitor, "I urge you to do what you can to find the deeds otherwise it is going to cost Mr O'Connell a great deal of money and time to replace them."

After making it quite clear to anyone within earshot that he had an unalterable distaste for handing over any more money than was absolutely necessary, Barney and Mr Wilson abruptly left the office. It was not Mr Wilson's idea; he was grasped by the upper arm and hurried down the stairs.

"You get stuck into it, Boy," admonished Barney over his shoulder to Wilkie as they paused at the office door. "It's about time somebody stirred up those loafers in the government. You go in and see the head sherrang; hammer on the table and tell him you want some action. You'd better do it pretty damn quick or I'll go in with you and roar the tripes out of some of them in there."

The solicitor shuddered as they left the office; he resolved to fall over and break a leg rather than accompany his client to interview anyone in the Titles Office.

"Where are you going now?" asked the blacksmith when they were in Barney's car.

"Back to work, where else? I've been away from the place too long as it is, and if I'm not there things start to come unstuck. A man can't turn his back for five minutes in this racket without things going wrong some way or another."

"That's alright about you, Barney. Leave the place to Don for another quarter of an hour or so. I want you to take me up to the bank so I can get rid of this cheque. If I lose it, or it falls into the fire, or something, I'll have a hell of a job getting another one off you. Anyway, Don's alright in the auction room, he can manage on his own. You've got a real good bloke there, Barney, and you should treat him better than you do."

"What! you reckon Don's a good worker? That poon! he'd be alright with a battery under his saddle. Anyway, I'll make time to take you to your bank. Poor old bugger, you're getting a bit dodderly now, and if I don't look after you you'll fall down in the street, or give the money to some kind of gentleman to hold for you, or even give it to your missus. We can't have that Hold tight old trapper, we're off."

Chapter – 12

"What's been happening while I've been away? Everything all right?" inquired Barney of Don. He saw Freddy carrying some chairs.

"What the hell's he doing here?"

"Helping," said Freddy promptly. "Tom and Chip didn't need me this morning, but they said I'd be right for the afternoon. So I thought I'd give Don a hand. Y'gotta give me a job, Barney. Don't be so bloody stubborn, Y'need me here."

"Yair, I need you as much as I need a dose of the clap."

"Barney, stop being a bully, leave the boy alone." Maggie Spear called from the table where she worked. "There are some letters here for you. And when am I going to get my office?"

"You'll get it when I give it to you." Barney forced his thumb under the flap of the first envelope and tore it open. It was a solicitor's letter. Barney read it and clicked his tongue in disgust. "What a dill," he muttered. "I told him not to waste his money on lawyers." He gave the letter to Don. It was from a legal firm in the city. They were acting on behalf of one Thomas Cave, who had been unlawfully deprived of a bag containing an unknown sum of money by one Barney O'Connell; and advising that the said Barney O'Connell had better hand over the bag and contents forthwith, together with two guineas legal costs, in order to avoid an action at law or possible criminal charges.

"That Tommy, he shouldn't be allowed out without a nurse! He'll get himself into real trouble one of these days if he goes fooling around with lawyers like this."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I know what I should do with it, only it might be a bit scratchy." He balled the letter up in his hand and threw it over his shoulder. The next letter was also from a solicitor; this time from Wilkie and Mather, inquiring in a more conciliatory tone about the money, but hinting, nevertheless that the heirs of Edward Sturgess were entitled to any treasure found in his furniture and that they intended to get it.

Barney treated the second letter the same as the first then gazed sternly at Don. "What's this about Freddy, what's he doing here?"

"Working!" retorted Don. "I took him on because I can't do it all on my own. Dan and Manny have got their stuff and gone and I couldn't have done it without Freddy to help me."

"Well, tell him to clear off. I'm here now."

"I'd better go too," said Don morosely. "This job's gunna kill me if I can't get any help. You're not here most of the time and I have to do it all on me own."

Barney would have continued the argument but was interrupted by the sight of Chip Dowd and Tom Neerim rolling up to the front of the auction room in the old Dodge car. Since acquiring possession, they had discovered that though decrepit the old vehicle was about equal to their tip truck, so they often used it. Sitting on the seat between them was a young woman in her early twenties. She got out with them, dusty and shaken.

Barney glared at the girl. "What are you doing here, Kathleen?" he demanded. "Haven't I told you to keep away from the business? This is no place for you."

"We saw her walking this way so, being gentlemen born, all we could do was offer her a lift."

"I came here because I wanted to; I can go anywhere I like and I don't have to ask your permission."

"You'll do what you're told and like it. If I say you're not to come here, you won't come here, and I won't argue, that's it."

"He's in bad mood today," cried Maggie Spear. "The law's closing in on him. Go after him, Kath!"

"I was walking here from the railway station and the boys stopped and gave me a lift the rest of the way."

"Well, they can just take you back again, you're not wanted here."

"Turn it up, Barn., Kath's a big girl now, she should be able to go where she likes. It's a free country; why can't she come down here if she wants to?"

"You two keep out of this, it's a family matter and we can settle it between us without any help. She knows what it's all about, and if I've told her once I've told her a dozen times I don't want her hanging about down here."

"I'm going to work here, Mr Neerim, did Dad tell you? And the very first thing we're going to do is get some paint and tidy up this horrible front; and then we're going to have a spring-clean and clean the place out from top to bottom, aren't we, Dad?"

"First sensible thing that's been said here this morning," cried Maggie, don't give into him, Kath!"

Barney ignored her to shout at his daughter. "You'll touch nothing! This is a good business and I'm not going to have it mucked up because you don't know what you're doing. This place has kept you fed and clothed and the last thing it needs is a woman hanging around."

"Yes it does! I'm going to be an asset to this business, just you wait and see."

Forget it! Women are trouble and you're more trouble than most; so you can just clear off, go home and ask your mother for some work to do, women's work."

The two O'Connells faced one another determinedly, forgetful of the interest that the onlookers were showing in their argument. Even the blacksmith heard raised voices and joined them.

Kathleen O'Connell was twenty two and, to her father's chagrin, was still unmarried. She was far too argumentative, to find a husband easily. After working some years in an office as a typist, book-keeper she had grown tired of it and now, after giving up her job, had turned her attention to the auction room.

"You're going to give me a job and I'm going to be the first lady auctioneer in Victoria," she announced.

"That's the way to talk to the old bugger," said Freddy approvingly.

"Keep it up, love," cried Mrs Spear. "Just wear him down. He'll have to show some common sense sometime."

"By Hell, you're not!" was Barney's reaction. "You won't have anything to do with the auction because I won't give you any wages."

"We'll see what the union has to say about that. Now give up, Dad. This place will be very good if it's properly painted and sign-written, and you had better talk to Mr Wilson about having a concrete floor put down. This dirt floor we've got in here, it's prehistoric. Wouldn't you like to have a nice clean place to work in? Mum and I are ashamed if people ask us if we're anything to do with Barney's Auctions. It's so dirty and ugly people turn their noses up at it."

"Yair," said Freddy, "And tell him to give me a job too; between us we could make a go of this place. All it wants is a bit of proper management; I can see big possibilities here."

Barney was opening his mouth to shout a reply to these heresies when he was stopped by the telephone ringing. It was screwed to one of the timber uprights. Mrs Spear had to get up from her table and walk to the wall when the phone rang.

"It's for you," she said.

Without a word Barney went to answer the call; perhaps he was glad to escape an argument with one of the few people who refused to back down before him.

Kathleen smiled at the men. "He'll come round," she stated confidently. "It'll take a while, but he'll get used to the idea sooner or later."

"Beauty!" cried Freddy enthusiastically. "Do you want to get married? I reckon I'd marry you if that's how you get a job round here."

"You'll get a clip over the earhole if you're not careful," announced Don. "If you want a job here get on with it. We'll talk to Barney about you later. Start straightening up the stock where I told you or I'm gunna change me mind."

"Too late, am I, Don? Got your eye on her yourself, have you, Don? Alright, mate, I won't cut you out this time, but just watch it, and treat her right, otherwise I'll want to know the reason why."

"Don dug his elbow forcibly into Freddy's ribs and that forward young man disappeared into the auction room. Don followed to make sure he was working properly.

"I liked the way you handled Barney," said Tom Neerim. "Anyone that can talk like that won't go too bad as an auctioneer. What do you think, Chip?" Chip nodded and winked to show that he was in full agreement with his friend. "Chip and me may not be around to see you when you get your license, but we reckon you'll be a real hum-dinger. You stick at it and make him clean the place up a bit; anything like that round here would be an improvement.

George Wilson had been listening and now came to speak with Kathleen. "What's wrong with Barney? He's as mad as a pork chop. He needs you and Don in this business, but instead he's trying to drive you away."

"It's not that so much," explained Kathleen, "Partly it's because he's jealous of anyone interfering in his business, but the real reason he doesn't want me around here is Don. We're Micks and he's not."

"Micks?"

"Catholics! The O'Connells are Catholics, as you might have noticed. Grandpa O'Connell came from Ireland, and Dad keeps telling me that we're Romans and Don's not, he's nothing."

Tom walked past carrying some chairs. He put them down and snapped his fingers. "So that's what he's going on about. Freddy was quicker at picking the odds than we were. Gawd, I wouldn't wake up if a dunny fell on me. Good on you, Kath, I think Don must be the same

religion as Chip and me, and you couldn't get better blokes than us. Don's a beauty. You snap him up, and good luck to both of you, I say."

Mr Wilson was puzzled. "You and Don are keen on each other, and Barney doesn't like his religion, I didn't think it mattered anymore."

"It does to Dad."

"I'll have a chat with him," said Tom.

"Don't you dare, unless you want to make things worse than they are."

"Alright luv. We won't say anything"

"Good! The less said the better. Don and I suit one another, and Dad can carry on as much as he likes it's not going to make any difference. Besides, he needs someone round here to keep an eye on him; he's getting more rude to the customers every day."

"Well, you go and talk to Don. We want to nobble Barney and ask him about the money Don found; we reckon if the money was in our chest it belongs to us."

Kathleen was doubtful of this proposal; she knew from long experience the difficulty of parting her father from any cash. He was always punctilious about paying debts, but equally determined to hang on to that which he considered his.

The two men had told her of their plan to go to Queensland and settle on a pineapple farm. All that was needed was a favourable reply from their friend before making the final decision. The profit they would pick up from the demolition of the house and a few pounds from Barney, for the sale of the Sturgess furniture should get them through to their new home but the budget would be very tight. If they could prise the bag of money from Barney's grasp, they would be that much more secure and would perhaps arrive with some cash in hand.

They found Barney with little difficulty in the retail section, because of the noise he was making. Don and Freddy were busy next door stacking furniture and goods ready for auction and putting everything that had been sold, but not yet collected, conveniently to one side. They were used to the man shouting and hectoring the customers; it was best not to get mixed up in Barney's arguments. They chatted to Kathleen while the row next door sorted itself out.

Barney was having a spirited quarrel with a New Australian woman who had brought her family into his premises while looking round at the goods for sale. He was accusing her of damaging the stock with a large wicker pram. It was a big pram and the place was so cluttered the only way to get it through was by brute force and persistence. She was using it like an ice-breaker pushing through pack ice. The baby in the pram, apparently used to such treatment, slept on peacefully in spite of the noise and its rough passage.

Barney sternly pointed out a fresh scratch mark low down across the front of a walnut veneer wardrobe. It was obviously made by the axle of the pram for a chrome hub-protector had fallen off leaving the square end of the axle exposed. She refused to see any scratches and denied responsibility; she said the furniture was scratched before she had appeared on his premises and argued vehemently in defence of several children, apparently hers, whom he accused of swarming over his stock and doing untold damage.

Neerim and Dowd arrived at a critical moment for Barney because the woman, instead of retreating from the argument, as did most of his meeker opponents, was stoutly defying him while ploughing on towards her objective. This was a large cedar chest visible at the back of the room.

"What's going on here?" asked Tom Neerim jovially, "Who are you grizzling at now?"

"Oh, its you," grunted Barney. "It's enough to turn a man up. Look at what she's doing to my stuff with that bloody great pram of hers. I suppose her old man was driving Panzer tanks

during the war; he must've given her special training before she came here. Look Missus, can't you tell those kids of yours to keep their fingers to themselves? I suppose you'd think I was a hard man if I came up to your place and started to kick the furniture around."

"I don't reckon it'd worry her much," said Tom Neerim softly. "With a mob of kids like she's got it probably wouldn't make much difference what you did to the joint. Anyway you can't spend the day talking to your fancy women, we came up to see you about that money."

The New Australian woman was now opening the drawers of the chest and slamming them again. She shook it vigorously and tried to twist it to see if the joints were loose. A roll of lino leaning against the chest slid and then fell over dislodging one or two smaller articles but she ignored the chain reaction of crashes in her concentration on the chest.

In those days even Barney did not swear in a woman's presence, nor could he haul her out of the place bodily. He had a rich flow of language but it was not enough to budge the woman from her purpose. At length he subsided. "It's enough to make a man give up hope!" he grumbled. "I work my insides out to make a go of this place and I'm the only one that does anything around here. I can't leave because something comes unstuck if I do. Yet even when I'm here you get silly old sheilas like this paddling round the joint knocking quids and quids off the value of everything. Look at the scratches on this stuff." He rubbed the damaged surface with his leather apron.

"I have to sell all this. Why the hell does she keep coming back here? I wouldn't let her have anything if there was only one quid left in the world and she had it. She knows that as well as I do, but she keeps hauling that dirty big pram into the place."

The woman had now decided that the chest was what she wanted and started to leave. She found the pram even harder to push out than it was to get it in.

"Give her a lift, Barney," advised Tom. "Help her over the stock. If you're worried about damage you should help her out."

"I'll give her a lift under the bloody ear. That's how I'll help her out. Look at that!"

The woman was using both hands and all her weight to push the pram through the conglomeration of articles that jammed up any free movement in the retail section. Seeing that Barney was not going to help, Tom and Chip gallantly lifted the whole outfit over the top of the scattered stock and set it down, with the baby still sleeping, in a cleared place just outside the door.

"That's it," said Barney, "Goodbye, and if I don't see you again, it'll be too soon."

"If you kept your business properly instead of having it so untidy people could come in and walk round and buy things," the woman retorted.

"Yair, that's right, Barney. Why don't you get stuck into it and do a bit of work now and again? You don't want to make Don and Freddy do everything."

"Those loafers! They wouldn't know what day it is. If I was thirty years younger I'd run the whole show on me own. As it is I'm doing the work and carrying them both on me back."

"I go find someone better than you," said the woman. You very rude man. I tell my friends to stay away from here."

"If they're anything like you I hope they do. The last thing I want is a flock of old tarts round here ruining me business. And count those kids before you go!" he roared as a parting shot as the woman went out through the door. "I don't want any left behind."

She shook the pram at him and pulled a face.

"There's no doubt about it, Barney," said Tom Neerim as the woman gathered up her family and went next door, "You've got a way with women; just keep the flattery coming and

you can do anything with them. I know it's not your looks; it must be your personality that gets them in."

"Yair, I'm lucky aren't I? I get all the best customers, and I got clowns working for me too, very funny! Anyway I can't spend all day standing round listening to you dribbling on. What do you want?"

"It's about the money you found in that old chest of ours. Chip and me've been thinking it over and we reckon if it was in our chest it must be our money. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Go and see your solicitor," advised Barney, "Everyone else has."

"We haven't got any money to pay solicitors, and we wouldn't go near them anyway. It's nothing to do with the law, it's between us three."

"In all the years I've known you that's the first sensible thing I've ever heard you say," commented Barney generously. "I had to go and see one myself this morning, and that was only because I couldn't do it any other way. Even then he wanted to give me the run around. The best thing you can do with lawyers is stay away from them."

"Yair, that's alright, but what about the money? Don't you reckon if it was in our chest then it should be ours?"

"If you look at it one way that's O.K. but I've got other people around and they're looking at it a bit differently to you." He handed over the two letters he had received in the morning's post. Don had smoothed them out and returned them to him. The two men read the letters and gave them back.

"That puts the kybosh on us, doesn't it? Two solicitor's letters in one day, that must be a record even for you, Barney. We've never had any, but then we don't get into as many fights as you do. I don't know what the law is when you find a bag of money like this but we're the only ones that can't afford to pay anything to get it."

"I don't know," said Barney. "I have to nut the whole thing out myself. All I'm sure of right now is that little prawn Cave isn't going to get the dough even if I have to burn it. He kept raving on about a cow and its unborn calf. The way he went on anyone would think the old chest had a bun in the oven. To tell you the truth I don't know what I'm going to do with the money. I might just get sick of the whole thing and throw it off the end of the pier, then you can all go and fish for it."

"Do you know what was in that bag? A hundred and sixty quid all in £20 notes; I counted it up last night. All brand new, and look as though they've never been spent. Anyway if those silly drongos take me to court the lawyers'll get the lot and we'll wind up with sweet Fanny Adams."

They moodily contemplated for a moment or two the complications wrought in simple lives by a sudden access of wealth, or loss of it.

Barney said, "Are you blokes free to work here for a while. I have to shift the lino and fix up the wall. If you could spare me a few hours it would be a great help."

"How much?" asked Tom. They often worked for Barney, but the rate of pay was always open to negotiation.

"Five bob an hour."

"A dollar an hour! You minjy old cow! Chip and me wouldn't soil our hands in this dump under ten bob, that's a quid an hour between us, and five bob for Freddy."

Barney was so demoralised by his recent experiences that he forgot to argue and beat them down to seven and sixpence as they both expected; he even missed the reference to Freddy

and his five shillings. They could afford to work for Barney for the rest of the day, he always paid cash, and the demolition of the old house was going well.

A little cast down at the thought of missing out on the money from the chest the two men, under Barney's direction, began to tidy up and make a place for the lino then hauled it painfully, roll by roll into its new position. While they worked they told him of their latest plan to emigrate to Queensland and grow pineapples.

"Well, its no use trying to tell you jokers anything because you can't learn. I thought for a minute there you were getting some sense; but I see I was wrong. You get into this pineapple racket and you'll be back in Vic. inside six months with the arse out of your pants looking for a job. You two have got strong backs and weak heads, and well, I admit that's a great start for anyone that's going on the land, but strewth, its only someone who was born a cocky that can make a go of being a cocky. Even if you know the game backwards and you've got enough capital there are still millions of things that can go wrong. You can sit up all night nursing your pineapples and they'll end up getting curly leaf or something or other. If you go on the land it'll be the worst day's work you ever did! Anyway even if you did fluke a profit the tax man would grab it off you. That's like me, I'm working myself into the ground to support that rotten mob of wasters we've got up in Canberra. No, with the set up we've got in this country you just can't win."

Kathleen now bustled into the retail department with the New Australian woman. She had persuaded her to leave the pram and her family outside on the footpath. There was no immediate explosion and Barney contented himself for the time being by glaring.

The two women picked their way through the clutter and Kathleen began extolling the good points of the chest of drawers. The cedar panels were not cracked and it had been kept in a state of high polish. The only flaw was a scratch across the front, which the customer pointed out.

The chest was decorated on either side with two turned shafts that were described as 'Barley Sugar Twist', and a central, top drawer was decorated in relief with carved leaves. Don had bought it at an auction sale for six pounds ten-shillings.

Kathleen asked her father the price of the chest but got only a surly response and the information that there were men at work in the shed and the sooner she got out of the way and went home the better.

"He said it's worth £5," said Kathleen at random to her customer, who folded her arms and glared back at Barney.

"Bloody Hell!" shouted Barney. "Five quid! Are you trying to break me? That thing's worth fifteen quid if it's worth anything; it would be cheap at fifteen! Now clear off, go on, go home before you do any more damage."

"Don't pay any attention," Kathleen confided to her customer. "We just keep him here to bark at people. This will be a lesson to you, Dad. In future you put the prices on things so we will both know. Five pounds is right," she said to the triumphant woman. "You will have to pay for delivery of course; we couldn't deliver it for that price."

"We can't even live at that price. She's cost me money ever since she first dragged her pram into the joint and now you're starting."

"Well, you've had a cheap lesson; from now on mark everything in the place so we both know. Another thing, as soon as you get the floors fixed up, we will have to think about getting proper price tickets."

"Yair, we can do all that when I go broke! How the hell can we sell goods at a loss and buy price tickets to do it? That's a fancy way of running the business into the ground!"

Kathleen answered him pertly and the two women looked triumphantly at the common enemy who glowered back at them.

"Alright," he said giving in suddenly, "You can sell it, give it away, do anything you like with it. What do I care what happens to the business? Just because I walked into these crummy old sheds and built it up from nothing, and worked like hell to do it, doesn't mean anything, I suppose. Go on! Throw me money away; between you and the tax man what hope have I got?" He had received a tax demand some days ago and had not yet recovered.

"You sell, I pay for delivery now," said the woman, who knew about the price of cedar chests and was anxious to clinch the deal. "I live five hundred yards away, no more; how much will cost the delivery?"

Don, who had heard the last sentence, but none of the preceding dispute now poked his head round the door and said, "We're running a special today, love; we'll do it for a pound a yard." He winked at Kathleen. "'ow are yer, Fat! Can I see you in a minute, next door?"

He withdrew after making these remarks, leaving Kathleen to soothe her customer who did not yet understand the humour of her new countrymen. Eventually she extracted £5 for the chest and ten shillings for delivery. Chip and Tom were pleased to deliver it for this price after work.

"I'm in the wrong game," grunted Barney, "I wish I'd made ten bob on the deal."

"Ah, you'll be alright, Barn," they said. "Business is bound to look up soon."

"It's looking up alright; there's no other place it can look; it's on the flat of its bloody back."

A livid silence descended on Barney after this remark and Kathleen had gone next door to talk to Don. The three men laboured in silence, lifting the lino, carrying and stacking.

"Don't hang around here!" Barney shouted suddenly to the wall. "Don't think I'm going to pay you a cracker because I'm not. You go home and help your mother she needs you - I don't."

"You need me, even though you won't admit it!" answered the wall; "and I can get my own wages. I know where the money's kept, and I'll pay Freddy too. Why don't you give up and put us on the pay-roll!"

"Don't you touch the takings! I won't have it!"

"Yes I will! I'll take fair wages every week until you're ready to give in, then we'll talk."

There was a silence after this unsatisfactory exchange.

"Troubles, Barn?" said Tom Neerim, "can I lend you a hanky?"

"Nothing I can't handle," retorted the proprietor who was now rather doubtful of the outcome of the dispute. "How many daughters have you got?"

"I've got two girls, Chip's got two. Why do you ask?"

"Give 'em a belting now and again while you've still got the chance. Once they grow up it's too late." He brooded over lost opportunities.

"If I hit my girls Marie'd skin me alive," said Tom. "It's too late for me too."

Chip nodded. "Same with me. I'd have to sleep with the chooks for a month if I touched one of the twins."

Musing over the perils of raising children the three men went on with their work.

Chapter – 13

Some mornings later Don took the blitz-buggy to go the auction of a deceased estate in a private house. If successful, he would return with the vehicle stacked high with second-hand household equipment and furniture.

Don was nervous. This was the first time he had been allowed off the leash, for Barney did all his own buying. He would not have been given the opportunity except on the day of the auction his proprietor was still having daughter trouble.

Her father did not approve of ambitious women. He did not mind them being in the office, answering the telephone, or in the kitchen, looking after a husband, but auctioneering was a man's job.

What annoyed him also was her attempts to set herself up as a saleswoman, and in competition to him. She ignored his orders that she should go home or, at least work with Maggie Spear.

Maggie heard him saying all this. "Pay no attention to him love." she cried. "He's like all men, talks a lot, but if you want anything done get a woman. I was a WAAF you know, in the war, but he wasn't, couldn't pass the physical.' She cackled and sat down again to her typewriter and the accounts.

Encouraged by this Kathleen stayed the course and battled with her father for the attention of each client who entered the premises. They had numerous verbal tussles over the heads of startled customers, with mixed success. Some fell prey to Kathleen's persuasiveness and some were dragged away by Barney.

No sooner did anyone appear at the front of the building, or show an interest in the goods displayed than the O'Connells would come out casting black looks at each other, ready to do wordy battle. If a car pulled up at the kerb, either one or both would be somewhere at hand waiting for the newcomers to alight.

The honours between the two were fairly even; Kathleen had more success with the women customers for Barney was unable to shepherd them away with a mixture of bonhomie and terseness, as he did with the men, and march them inside in a sort of policeman's grip to point out the bargains on show. Between them even the most casual or dilatory shopper had little chance of escaping from Barney's establishment without buying something.

The big sales special for that week was a consignment of stirrup pumps; Barney had bought five hundred at a disposal auction. They were relics of the war against the Japanese in the Pacific when the government had prepared for thousands of bombs raining on Melbourne. Air raid wardens had been recruited and issued with these pumps and buckets of sand and water. When placed upright in a bucket of water the pumps were held firm by the operator standing on a stirrup which rested on the floor. If the plunger was worked vigorously up and down a thin but powerful jet of water could be directed on to a fire through a nozzle and hose held in the other hand.

Fortunately the long-awaited bombers and their incendiary loads were turned back and destroyed far away. The air-raid wardens did not have to face conflagrations with these hand held devices so the pumps were returned to the authorities and mouldered in a warehouse until they were purchased and hauled back to Barney's store for sale.

At the auction the pumps had cost five shillings each and now they were being retailed for ten shillings and sixpence. Barney thought they could be used for fire-fighting, spraying fruit trees or blackberries, they could also be adapted to spray white-wash or for anything the ingenuity of the customer might suggest.

It happened that every customer who came near the O'Connells was eventually taken to view the stirrup pumps in their dusty cartons. If the slightest indecision or weakness of character was shown the purchaser had a stirrup pump pressed into his hands. The only escape was to buy something else, and each sale made was a point scored by one O'Connell against the other in an unspoken contest.

Sometimes a good sale would count as a temporary triumph and the defeated contestant would brood until a chance came to even the score.

Tom Neerim and Chip Dowd were responsible for turning this rivalry into a contest. They had seen what was going on and after finding a child's blackboard and some chalk sent in for auction they handed it and the chalk to Maggie to keep score as they worked. This was watched secretly but jealously by father and daughter as they bustled past, shepherding customers in and out and away from the rival of the afternoon.

The only time the two spoke to one another was when Kathleen asked the price of an article and her father, who was still brooding over the sale of the cedar chest, was careful to tell her accurately, though curtly, the information she wanted. He also managed to convey, though not subtly, the information that her mother would be wondering where she was, and why she was not home helping with the house-work. Kathleen ignored his remarks and proceeded to deal briskly with the customers that came her way.

She had a natural talent as a saleswoman and combined a pleasant manner with a shrewd business sense. Barney was a good buyer and people who were not put off by his manner found him easy enough to deal with. He was not prepared to admit that Kathleen would be an excellent addition to the staff. The contest continued.

The range of goods they stocked was becoming more varied. A factory nearby which had opened after the war made pressed steel baths and basins, enamelled in various colours. Not all their wares passed inspection Perhaps the colour had run a little, perhaps there were wrinkles in the metal pressings. Barney bought their mistakes cheaply and sold them all.

By late afternoon, Barney's temper had started to deteriorate, Kathleen had sold a new sink and cabinet, a trough unit, and a pressed steel bath, all to one customer, for thirty five pounds twelve and sixpence and was several points ahead on the improvised score. This customer was a woman whom Barney had caught trying to pull open the door of a sink cabinet. He had ordered her to keep her hands in her pockets and either buy the thing or stop interfering. Kathleen reproved her father for saying this and, in the resulting uproar, the woman had gone to her for comfort and support.

Kathleen, anxious to score off her father, had agreed with every complaint, and had been so successful she did not even bring up the subject of stirrup pumps, but went straight on to selling the bath and laundry hardware already mentioned.

By the time Mrs Spear had written out a receipt for the £35.12.6 and the contractors had collected £1 cartage to deliver the articles, Barney had reached simmering point. A quick follow-up sale by Kathleen of six kitchen chairs and eight yards of lino to Barney's nothing, brought him almost to the point of the biggest tantrum he had staged for a while.

"Come on, Dad," said Kathleen, very pleased with herself. "You'd better buck up a bit, I'm leaving you behind. Now, see how you need a woman in the place!"

Her father, whose only recent success had been to sell an offcut of laminate for five shillings, did not reply, but stalked heavily to Maggie's table and scrabbled some change out of the mess of notes and coins jumbled into a drawer that served as a till.

"Bloody women!" he said as he handed over the five shillings change. Kathleen promptly sold his customer a can of glue to stick down the laminate; this Barney had forgotten to do. With set face and muttering to himself he moved down into the deepest recesses of the retail department. Even Kathleen did not dare follow him there. She and the two contractors, and Freddy, found work to do in the auction room, waiting to see what would happen next.

While Barney was waiting to explode Don arrived with the blitz-buggy. He had had a successful afternoon at the auction because the truck was loaded with a mixture of furniture and household goods.

"Gooday, Alice," he said to Kathleen, sticking his head out of the side window as the rattling turbulence of the old machinery grated to a halt. "Wotcher been doing this afternoon? I hope you haven't been picking on poor old Barney while I wasn't here to protect him."

"Cut out the cackle and let's do some work round here for a change," said Barney, rushing up and tugging impatiently at the ropes. "It's like mother's day in the labour ward the way everyone carries on round here; the only difference is you don't produce anything."

"Hey! Tom, Chip! Come out here and do some work for a change; I know you're in there, I can hear you breathing. What did you pay for this lot?" he continued.

"Seventy five quid!"

"Seventy five quid!!" shouted Barney, "Bloody hell, that was my money you were chucking away. The way you spend the stuff anyone would think it was going out of fashion. How can a man get seventy five quid back on this heap of old kak you've got on the truck, or maybe you have to go back for another load of the better stuff you bought.?"

"Selling it's your problem Barney, all I do is buy it! It's your job to sell stuff round here, not mine. Anyway you're the prize whinger of all time. If you can't see a hundred quid profit staring you in the face here, you ought to have your head read.

Look at this!" Don rapped the front of a respectable looking old double door robe with a centre mirror. It was held on with a spider web tangle of frayed ropes. "Paid £5. for that. If you can't get up on the rostrum and get a tenner or twelve ten for it, you deserve a good swift quick kick in the bum. Anyway, if you don't like the way I buy at auction, do it yourself; it's no skin off my nose."

"Dad, you leave Don alone," interposed Kathleen. "He's bought well at the auction, better than you any day. What about all those bren gun carrier wheels you got at the government auction?"

This was a flank attack on one of Barney's weak spots. He had bought over fifty of these heavy steel wheels at a disposal sale in the belief that they were saleable as scrap. After trying several metal dealers, he discovered that it was the wrong type of steel required at that time, and he and Don had worn themselves out bringing the wheels back load by load and stacking them in the yard. Each wheel had to be rolled separately through the dust, out the back door, and stacked laboriously in the yard. There they lay waiting for someone to start another war, and they would possibly be needed.

"My Gawd!" exclaimed Don, clutching at his stomach. "If I'd been on workers' com, I would have had a hernia out of that lot. I reckon I was worn down six inches after we unloaded all those bloody wheels."

"We'll sell 'em, no worries," said Barney. "I sold two the other day to one of the councils, and they'll probably be back for more. What for? They'll use them on those portable dunnies the council blokes have when they're working on the roads; I reckon we'll sell the lot that way."

"Face up to it, Barney," said Freddy who had consolidated his position with the firm, and started to untie the ropes. "You got a limited market here. How many councils are gunna buy wheels off you to put under their portable dunnies. I reckon we got forty years supply out the back."

"Alright, well just belt up about it. We'll have to leave them sit there, but they'll go alright. If you keep a thing for seven years in this game, you're bound to sell it in the end."

"There's no seven years about this lot," said Kathleen, who had been examining the goods as they came off the truck and comparing them to the auctioneer's account. "Don has done very well for you here, and you should be praising him instead of complaining all the time. There's no doubt about you, Dad, you just don't know how to say 'thank-you'."

"That's it, Kath," said Tom Neerim trotting past with a cheval mirror cradled in his arms. "It's about time somebody got stuck into him; he's not that model of smiling tact and courtesy any more that used to be the envy of all the rich nobs up in Toorak."

"Yair, well I wish they'd come down here and try and run this business for a while. There are too many comedians in the joint and not enough workers. What's this?" He pulled a flat object out of the truck cabin; it was carefully wrapped in a grubby blanket used on the truck as packing. Barney unwrapped it and found himself looking at a painting about three feet by two. It was in a chipped gilt frame and, though dimmed with age and neglect, the subject was clear. It showed a bullock team pulling a wagon piled high with wool bales across a bridge.

"They must have chucked this in with something else," said Barney. "Are you sure you went to the right auction? It's a wonder McLaren didn't put it up as a separate lot; I've never known him to give anything away before."

"It was a separate lot," Don retorted, taking the picture and rubbing it with his sleeve to remove some of the dust. "I bought it at the auction; the old boy said it was a tremendous investment, very valuable. He said once the boom in Australian art got under way you'd be able to name your own price."

"He was conning you yer dill, conning you! You didn't fall for that line of patter, did you? It's a wonder he didn't get out the pea and thimbles. You ought to know by now not to take any notice of an auctioneer, any auctioneer, and particularly Uncle Scrooge. Once he gets into his stride he'll tell you anything, just so long as you buy what he's selling. What did you pay for it?"

"It's a very nice picture, one of the best I've ever seen." Kathleen had taken a quick peep at the auction account and was trying to soften the coming blow. "In a proper art shop it would bring a lot of money."

"I bet it would. Just the thing to brighten up the little house. Now I can't wait to find out the price. How much did he pay for it? Go on, how much?"

"Six pounds ten shillings."

"Six pounds ten! Six and a half smackers! He's bloody mad! Don't we sell bundles of pictures every week at a bob a time? If you'd wanted a picture you could have had one. I'll go and get you some out of the back of the auction room if you like. Here," he took money from his pocket and offered it to Don, "Take it and throw it in the gutter; it's easier for you and cheaper for me if you just throw it away. At least I don't have to pay your wages while you stand around all day making a goat of yourself."

"The frame's worth that."

"Shut up, Kath, you don't know anything about it. It's six pounds ten down the drain, I've done me money cold. Just throw it out the back with the other rubbish and let's try and get on

with the business. I suppose I've just got to take it on the chin, like all the other things that happen around here. Come on, let's get the rest of this stuff off the truck and we'll see what else he's done to me"

Freddy was holding the picture out at arm's length and studying it while this tirade was going on.

He said, "Fair dinkum, Barney, you're the crotchtiest old bugger I've ever met in me life. I tell you straight, pal, if you'd been living in the Garden of Eden you would have been complaining about worms in apples."

He studied it some more. "That's not a bad picture, you know, not bad at all! It's better than all that crap they call art and bring in from overseas. You'll get your money back on that, Barney, no worries! Stick it in the window and mark it ten guineas."

"Gawd!" said Barney, astonished. "Now he's an art critic. He's still got the ring of the pot on his behind and he's telling me how to run me business. I told you before I didn't want you round here and I still don't. What's the place coming to when you and Don are the best bloody help a man can get? I haven't got time to play games with you art experts. Just put it down the back of the auction where I can't see it and let's try and earn some money."

"Hold it, Barney," said Don, "You've been raving and going on about this but I'm still willing to back my judgment. I'll give you the six and a half quid and put it in the auction just to see what happens."

A man in a grey dust-coat had wandered up while this dispute had been going on. Tom Neerim now had the picture and he studied it over Tom's shoulder.

"No you won't," retorted Barney, "It's your blue but I have to carry the can. If I send you out to auction I don't expect you to share the profits, if any, so the losses are mine too."

"I'll give you the six ten for it," said the man in the dust-coat. "I could use a picture like that. Here, I'll pay for it now." He reached into his hip pocket for his wallet.

"You're mad," said Barney, "But I'll take your money."

"No you won't," Kathleen clasped the picture to her bosom. "This picture is to be sold at auction for the best price and not before. That's enough, Dad, don't roar at me. You'll stand up on the rostrum on Wednesday and we'll see what happens. We'll prove something and see how good a buyer Don really is."

"I know what sort of buyer he is," shouted Barney. "He's bloody lousy. Gawd, what a day! I'm being hammered into the ground like a peg. I got Don throwing my money away, then some galah tries to throw some of it back and you stop him. This is hell of a way to learn the auction business, isn't it?"

"Now don't start swearing, Dad, or I'll tell Father Hartigan and you'll get a flea in your ear next time he sees you. Just simmer down and listen. This picture is a question of judgment between you and Don because you say it's not worth anything and he says it's worth more than six pounds ten. I think Don is right; if he says it's a good buy, I believe him."

"How much do you believe," said Barney, suddenly perceiving a way out of his dilemma. "Are you game to put your money where your mouth is? I'm going to take you up on this, Kathleen, because here's a proposition for you. We'll put this thing up for auction and if it doesn't make ten quid you'll have to clear out of her and leave me in peace and you can take Freddy with you. You'll have to go and get a proper job."

"You said you'd take my offer of six ten," interposed the man in the grey dust coat. But I'll double it. Thirteen quid, there you are You'll make six ten profit and Don's off the hook."

They ignored him.

"How do I know you'll play fair? You might knock it down for a shilling before anyone has a chance to bid."

"I'll play fair, don't you worry about that! Tell you what, we'll get Father Hartigan to act as referee. We'll invite him along to the auction and anything over ten quid can go to the church."

"No, you won't? You will give half to the church and half to Don, and you will put me and Freddy on the staff here with wages every week."

"What wages? How much?"

"That's something to be settled between labour and management when the time comes; first we have to sell the picture."

"What have I got to lose?" said Barney, greatly relieved, "No one outside the mental home would pay more than a deener for it, and that would have to be for the frame."

"Twenty six quid," said the man in the grey dust-coat, "And that's me last offer, I wouldn't go any more for it."

"Ah, shut up and clear off," said Barney. "Go to Kew and see if they'll let you back into the asylum. I've got a chance of getting rid of this flamin' woman so I can run me business properly, and you want to balls it up. Don, put the picture in the auction." He stalked inside.

Chapter – 14

By the following Monday Barney had received several deputations of Chinese but they got little satisfaction from the interviews and he had resisted invitations to come and view the damage done to their gardens. They were difficult to understand, but he thought that was what they were trying to say. Also they seemed to have doubts about the quality of the repairs to the fowl-shed and fence.

The frames for both fence and shed were okay. So they should have been, the timber was from the old Sturgess home, and of the best kiln dried hardwood. What they objected to was the rusty old corrugated iron that had been nailed to the frame to replace the broken palings. It made an effective fence, but most ugly.

Barney brushed these complaints aside and the men would retire baffled, discussing his character vehemently among themselves.

Freddy was not sure the market-gardeners would accept Barney's dismissal of their claims. He had seen enough Fu Manchu films to understand that one should respect the anger of Orientals. He understood they were extremely polite, but an implacable and cruel race. He said privately to Tom and Chip that he was glad he was not in Barney's shoes; the Chinese had nasty ways with knives and red hot irons.

He mentioned this theory to Kathleen causing her great consternation and she wondered what deadly vengeance was being planned in the old house next door inhabited by the market gardeners.

It had once been a baker's shop with narrow, wooden framed show windows and a corrugated iron veranda roof supported on wooden posts over the dirt footpath. Wooden shutters had been clamped across the show windows years ago and fastened with heavy steel straps.

Kathleen had gone several times with Don to the cinema. They had seen films featuring Doctor Fu Manchu. From these they had learned that all Chinese were ruled by powerful secret societies called Tongs. The vengeance of a Tong could reach anywhere, and its members were utterly without mercy.

She wondered if she would inherit the business if Barney paid the price for his treatment of his neighbours or whether their vengeance would extend to his entire family. This, together with her concern about the painting, gave her a troubled week.

She said nothing to Barney, and very little to Don about the value of art, but had attended work every day and all the customers she dealt with were led past the picture, or had their attention directed to it one way or another, or were shown articles for sale close by. She would mention that the painting was to be sold at the next auction to the highest bidder, and point out the rarity and value of such a piece to people of modest means. Her attentions were in vain; the type of customer who attended Barney's establishment had little appreciation of art; though there was a steady demand for mirrors with sea gulls, or yachts etched on them, and flights of plaster ducks to hang on the lounge room wall were highly prized. However the customers she met did not have an interest in paintings; they were more concerned with objects such as stoves, second-hand goods, or furniture.

As the Wednesday of the auction sale approached Kathleen became dispirited; not a single art lover had appeared on the premises and she lost her zest for selling or talking about anything else. If a customer looked at the painting without seeing it, or walked away without admiring it, she lost interest. The stirrup pumps could moulder forever with the silver-fish in their musty cardboard boxes, the lino remained unrolled and unsold.

She went to the Municipal Library one evening after work to take out some art books and study them. There were plenty of pictures of overfed, scantily clad nymphs and cherubs after the style of Rubens. Any number of religious scenes, and hundreds of landscapes swarming with all kinds of improbable action; but of bullock carts crossing a bridge there was not a sign. Her heart sank.

Tom Neerim and Chip Dowd were also concerned about the coming auction. Barney gave them plenty of work, including the building a small office for Maggie Spear just inside the door of the auction room. The timber frame came from the old house, as did the surface of her counter which was made from slate roof tiles.

They struck a snag when, at Barney's orders, they started to clad the outside with odd pieces of rusted, galvanized iron. There was an immediate uproar when Maggie saw what they were doing.

Her objections were supported by Kathleen. They abused the contractors and then abused Barney when he came to see what the noise was about.

Barney went away again but told the men to put the old corrugated iron back where they found it, and they were to take building board from stock to finish the job. The sheets were a drab brown colour, though they would be painted before the job was finished.

While they worked they asked Kathleen about the prospects of getting a good price for the picture. She was dejected because no one she had talked to showed the slightest interest in art.

The two men talked of clubbing together and bidding up to £10 out of their meagre resources, but they knew what Barney's reaction would be if they turned up in the art department of his auction as buyers.

They decided to stop work long enough to attend the auction late in the afternoon. The lots were put up and knocked down at the rate of approximately one hundred per hour, so that lot 324, which was the picture, would be offered between three o'clock and half past, and they decided to be looking on when it was put up for sale.

The auctions were always advertised in the paper to start at noon, but never did. Usually it was about twenty past or half past when the auctioneer started to sell, sometimes even later, and he and Don would bicker at one another for being late.

The dealers and regular customers used to wander in before-hand to sit on the stock and yarn with Barney while he wolfed down his sandwiches. Then somebody was likely to appear with some last minute entries for the auction; these would have to be listed in the book and described and numbered in the catalogue. Often Barney would assign the dealers to do this chore while he and Don finished their lunches.

Many of the regular customers worked their passages before and during the sales because Barney would hector and bully them until they did so; not that they minded. It was good entertainment as well as an excellent source of stock for their shops or auction rooms. After the sale was over Barney would throw himself with tremendous energy into the job of loading their trucks and getting them away as fast as possible.

On the morning of the auction when the picture was to be sold he was quieter than usual. Like his daughter he had been thinking about the resale value of works of art. By then he was doubtful about his first low assessment of the value of Don's purchase. Nothing had been said about it since; it had been included in classified advertisement of the sale in the auction column of the paper under the one word 'painting'.

He had taken note too that Kathleen had displayed it prominently on a dressing table near the front door of the establishment. In spite of its display and Kathleen's efforts none of the customers appeared to pay any attention.

Up to this time the retail section of the business had always been closed during auctions. Hundreds of frustrated customers had vainly tried to buy other than the goods for auction; but the staff was too busy to deal with them. Sometimes a trusted dealer or acquaintance of Barney would be sent to help, but this primitive system would work only when the volunteer salesman was not interested in the goods being sold by auction at the time. Most of the customers turned away would come back later and buy what they wanted; they knew that although the business was conducted by an eccentric its stock of seconds, damaged, discontinued, and used goods were about as cheap as they could get anywhere.

Kathleen decided the best way she could make herself useful was to change all this. She volunteered to keep the retail department open in spite of her preoccupation with the painting and serve customers while the men were engaged in conducting the auction sale.

Her offer was rebuffed. Barney said he had better things to do than leave the auction and come and sort out the problems she would get herself into if she tried to sell things without supervision. And he wanted to know who was going to help carry goods out if she sold anything bulky or heavy. Also he intimated she would not be with them much longer anyway; so what was the point of it all?

At ten to twelve, in spite of her disapproval, Barney hauled the heavy old wooden doors shut and dropped the locking bar into place; then he went into the auction room. At five to twelve Kathleen reappeared while Tom and Chip unbarred the doors, and pushed them open again.

Shutting the doors at this time was a tradition that dated back to when the auction rooms had first opened for business.

Maggie Spear, was in her office waiting for the auction to begin when someone knocked on her door.

"Come in if you're good looking she cried, "Otherwise don't bother."

It was Kathleen at the door. "Chip and Tom opened the retail for me."

Maggie knew that, she had heard the squeal of hinges and the thump of heavy doors against the front of the building."

"Good on ya love," she said. If old Grumpy finds out there'll be a lot of roaring and cursing, but who cares. You and Don can look after yourselves when he's on the rampage, and I'm used to his moods.

"Thanks Maggie. Do you have a spare receipt book? If we sell anything I'll do the paper work. You'll be busy writing up the auction sheets I didn't come to the counter to get a receipt book because Dad might have seen me and wondered what I was up to

"Thanks pet. And I got me fingers crossed for you. I hope that picture brings in a million quid so I'll be able to see you every day, and see the boss's face when it does sell.

"Thanks Maggie you're right there'll be a lot of shouting and swearing if he finds out. He might come and shut the doors. If he does, I'll just wait until he turns his back and then open them right up again. It's ridiculous to turn business away like this; that's half a day's trading we lose every fortnight. Anyway, I may not be here after today because if no one wants Don's picture, that's it! I will have to go."

She saw a familiar face amongst those approaching to attend the auction; it was Tommy Cave. He had parked his utility nearby and was now marching with set face towards the auction room.

Kathleen regarded him doubtfully. If he was coming back for another round with Barney on the subject of treasure trove, she would not have given much for his chances. He did not reveal his intentions or stop to chat. He nodded distantly and passed on.

Barney saw the man as soon as he entered. He had found his favourite pencil stub in the desk drawer after much scrabbling and searching, and was about to get on the old chair and start the auction when the sight of Tommy Cave made him pause.

They looked at one another warily. "Good day, Tommy," said Barney. Cave nodded back coolly. "Good day, Barney, did you get the solicitor's letter?"

"Yair, it arrived, what about it?"

"We never got an answer."

"Never got an answer, that's funny! Maybe it's because I never sent one."

"You ought to be on the stage playing at the Tivoli, Barney, you're a real comic, but I want to know, are you going to answer the letter or aren't you?"

"No, I'm not! I've got nothing to say to you or your law-man that I couldn't say better with the toe of me boot. Any letter I wrote to you would catch fire unless it was written on asbestos. Just buzz off, Tommy, and leave me alone. I'm busy. I've got an auction to get off the ground." He climbed up on to his chair ready to start.

"Will you take any bids I make?" asked the dealer, hurriedly.

"Why not? I reckon you're a dill but the colour of your money looks O.K. to me; bid on whatever you want, I won't trot you any more than usual."

Cave winced at this reference to the auctioneer's trick of throwing in the occasional sly bid of his own to keep prices up. He said nothing further but retreated to the back of the crowd, which was beginning to gather, and continued to cast malevolent looks at the auctioneer.

The recipient of all this ignored him and recited the conditions of sale, or what he could remember without notes. Then Don and Freddy held up lot No.1, the auction started.

That day they had an extremely varied consignment of goods to auction. Some of the most awkward were bundles of moulding and architraves the contractors had carefully levered up and sent to auction, with a few other fitments from the old house. If this was successful, they

would bring in some more for next time. Some of the skirting, which had been hand-moulded from kauri pine, was up to fifteen feet long. Customers fell over the bundles from time to time as the crowd increased. When they did so, some suspicious, disturbed fowls in a wooden box with chook wire across the front would cackle loudly.

By far the most inconvenient item in the auction was a stationary, steam donkey engine with massive wheels on either side. It had become marooned in the soft dirt just inside the auction room door. The entire staff, plus one or two passers-by whom Barney had press-ganged into service attempted to move the machine. They had tried to drag it further inside, but as it weighed about half a ton, or more, and could not be wheeled or pushed any further over the soft ground.

It had bogged down on the spot and there it stayed, in spite of their gut-wrenching efforts. Finally they had abandoned hope of shifting its unwieldy mass and put a lot number on it instead; with luck some extremely strong person who wanted an obsolete stationary steam engine, would come along and buy the monster. In the meantime it was right in the door-way; an intolerable nuisance; anyone who entered or left had to sidle past it and it was difficult to bring goods in or out.

Barney had bought the thing for £5 in spite of Don's protests, and after the killing labour of getting it off the carrier's truck and into the auction room relations between the two men were strained.

They had half a dozen bolts of garish cloth bought from a customs sale, and ten large bottles of English confectionery from the same source. Another contribution were Japanese-made imitation Persian cotton carpets nailed up on the walls. This, together with the usual conglomeration of household goods and chattels, and electrical wares, all draped with old naval pennants sent in by a dealer, made a colourful spectacle.

The auction sale droned on through the afternoon. Everyone was in good form, and in a good humour, including the auctioneer. Many of the ladies in the front row, who would not have missed one of Barney's auctions, were delighted; some of them nearly choked over their acid drops they laughed so much at some of his more vulgar remarks. The sale of the occasional chamber pot or invalid commode was a particularly fruitful source of humour. For anyone who enjoyed lavatory-centred humour the auctions were a fortnightly feast; there were times when Tommy Cave was the only person in the crowd who was not chuckling or laughing outright.

It was Barney's turn to stop laughing when he tried to sell the old steam engine. It was rusty, cumbersome, outdated, and no one wanted it. Not a soul in the crowd would look at him when he offered it for sale, not a hand, or a finger, or an eyebrow stirred lest an unlucky twitch at the wrong moment should put that person in possession of the old iron contraption.

Barney stormed at them, then pleaded, it was to no avail; he even called on individual dealers by name but they all declined to take the thing off his hands. In the end, realising it was useless to harry the crowd any longer, he roguishly pretended to have some genuine bids, ran it up to £45 and knocked it down to Tommy Cave. Mr Cave nearly had a seizure on the spot; he had not put in a bid since entering the building but, unlike his usual conduct at the auction, had remained gloomily aloof. Now he thought Barney was starting a campaign of reprisals and this was the first blow. He agitatedly shouted denials and retractions, but Barney ignored him and continued the auction. It took Mimi Chandos and some of the other dealers several minutes to calm him down, and in the end they had to call on Barney to reassure him that the machine had not been booked to his account.

One of his buyers, who specialised in baths, and coppers, and household fittings, bought the skirting boards and fitments, not for much, but from Neerim and Dowd's point of view it was better than burning them on the fire that blazed every day as the old house was consumed.

At last, after an impatient wait, the picture of the rustic scene was about to go under the hammer. Tom Neerim and Chip Dowd were there; they had arrived a little earlier, but not wasting the opportunity had brought some more skirting and cornice timber for sale. As soon as they saw that the previous consignment was actually saleable, and customers were bidding on it, they off-loaded what they had ready to be taken inside before the doors were closed for the night. They shut and barred the retail section because Kathleen did not want to be pestered by importunate customers when the all-important lot 324 was being sold. One puzzled and irate customer ignored numerous hints that it was time to go and he was left in the dark when the doors slid to and the bar thumped into place.

The windows were obscured by stock and old, painted signs so the retail department became dark and gloomy when the doors were closed.

The builder must have run out of sky-lights when he roofed this section because there was not one there, and it was not fitted with electric lights. The only relief from the gloom apart from light leaking in through holes in the walls was from a few, random nail holes in the roof. These let in intense, thin beams of sunlight

Barney had purchased some pressure lanterns formerly used to light up mess halls or large tents and two of these hung from tie beams in the roof, but they were a nuisance to light and had to be continuously nursed and adjusted.

The lanterns were slung on pulleys to be lowered every now and then to be refilled with kerosene or to have the air pressure renewed as the light began to fail. Small air-pumps were built into the base of the fuel-holder and these had to be pumped every half hour or so, otherwise the pressure would fall and the lights would fade away and grow dim.

There had been three suspended on ropes which at the other end were anchored to various convenient, heavy items of stock. One day Barney, in a rush to find a piece of rope had forgotten their purpose and had cast off one of the ropes without bothering to look up. A lamp had instantly crashed on his head felling him to the ground, to the consternation of his customers and the barely concealed delight of the staff. Barney had been dazed for a minute or two and quite forgot why he had wanted the rope but the glass globe and mantel at the bottom of the lamp had been smashed and the heavy metal shade badly bent. The lamp was declared to be beyond repair, unlike Barney's head which recovered after a good deal of rubbing, and now there were only two lamps left.

The solitary customer in the retail section was angry at being marooned in the dark and left to stumble round on his own; he had ignored repeated hints that the department was about to close for an indefinite time and finally they left him to find his own way out through the door that connected with the auction room.

He followed Chip, whom he took to be a member of the staff. "What do you have to do to get some attention round here?" he demanded. "Do you have to drop dead? or what? I suppose if I was hanging by the balls waiting for service you'd just leave me there." Having got no satisfactory response to this query he went morosely back to the retail section muttering. He stayed in the room about half an hour examining laminate offcuts by match-light, a definite fire hazard, until at last he gave up and went away, complaining.

The three friends promptly forgot their customer and his troubles when they saw that they were just in time; Don and Freddy were stacking a three piece genoa velvet lounge suite

which Barney had disposed of for a satisfactory price and was about to turn his attention to the picture.

Kathleen trembled when she saw the painting being held up, and her knees felt weak at this moment of crisis in her fortunes. The scene of the wool wagon crossing the bridge looked so shabby and dim, the gilt frame so old and stained it seemed no one would dream of buying such a thing. Her two friends, equally interested in the outcome of the sale, stood close on either side, while Don, who had seen them in the crowd, gave an encouraging wink.

Don held the picture a little higher than usual while Freddy looked for the next lot. He was careful to display it so everyone present could get a good look, and that it was the right way up.

"Here we are," said Barney, "the next one coming up is a nice picture of a wagon crossing a bridge. The picture's a beauty and that's a good gilt frame; what am I bid?"

"It's an heirloom," Don added. "One of these days it's going to be worth hundreds and hundreds of quid. You're looking at a genuine early Australian masterpiece!"

The crowd laughed on cue at what they considered to be one of Don's pleasantries. He often made humorous remarks that helped the auctions go with a swing.

"You might be right, lad," said the auctioneer. "It could be worth a lot of money some day, but not in your time or mine. Now, let me tell the lies round here; I'm better at it than you. You hold the stuff up and I'll sell, unless you want to change places with me. This mob came to see the organ grinder, not the monkey, so let's get on with the sale. Well," he challenged the crowd. "What do you say? What's your opening bid?"

"I'll give you a pound for it, Barney," offered Tommy Cave, putting in his first bid for the day.

"Fair enough, Tommy. That's a good opener and I'll take it: you'll do your quid, of course, but that's not my worry. By the way, I forgot to mention, with every picture today we give away a free donkey engine. Don't forget to take yours with you when you go."

Not to be drawn again Cave kept his mouth shut while another ripple of amusement subsided. He was just about to demand that the painting should be knocked down to him when Fred Dorman doubled the offer on the strict understanding that the donkey engine remained in Barney's possession. Cave cast a liverish look at his opponent and was about to raise his offer to £3 when a voice from the other side of the crowd brought the bid to five.

Kathleen and her friends craned on tip-toe to see who was bidding, while Tommy Cave spun round to look. Kathleen recognised the man in the grey dust-coat who had made an offer for the work of art when it came off the truck. He had entered the auction room unnoticed about the same time as the parish priest who had come, as promised, to see fair play when the picture was sold.

Father Hartigan had heard all about the painting but had not seen it until Don held it up for display. Now he was keenly interested but in the press of the crowd was not able to get close, and he called out, "Barney, Barney! Before you do anything, I want to have a closer look. Pass it over here, Don."

The painting was passed over the heads of the crowd and the priest examined it. While he was doing so, Tommy Cave shouted a bid of six pounds which Barney accepted without much interest while they waited for the priest to make some comment.

"Don's assessment is nearer right than yours, Barney," he said passing the picture back. "It's possible it is a valuable picture but I don't know enough to say one way or the other. I can't make out the artist's signature, but, whoever he was, he had a genuine feeling for the bush, and

what seems to me to be an excellent technique. I'll give you ten pounds for it as an investment, I wouldn't have the slightest doubt of its value."

Kathleen was jumping up and down at the back of the crowd hugging the two contractors. Barney, quite startled, was about to open his mouth to rebuke the umpire for this partisan behaviour when they were interrupted by Tommy Cave. "You're too late," he was shouting, "he knocked the picture down to me; I bought it for six pounds and I want my rights, pass it over."

There was a startled pause for a moment while everybody absorbed the significance of this bid by the excitable dealer.

"What are you trying to put across, you little pommy bastard? I never knocked it down to anyone," said Barney starting to talk, as usual, before anyone else had had a chance to recover. "That right, Father?"

"That's right, my son. I agree with the sentiments though not the language in which you expressed them. I did not hear you end the bidding and my offer stands."

"You Micks!" shouted Tommy again, "You always stick together! That picture was knocked down to me and everyone knows it. You can't keep on doing this to me, Barney, I won't have it. First you steal my bag of money, now you're trying to diddle me out of a picture. It's not going to work, there's justice in this country you know."

"That's right, Tommy. You'll get justice? Run back and see your lawyer man; weep on his shoulder for a while and get him to write some more letters; maybe you'll get a special price for repeat business."

"It's no laughing matter. I'm a J.P. and I can tell you---". This was as far as the man was able to continue because the crowd and his fellow dealers shouted him down. He had divided them at the previous auction because some had seen justice in his claim, but this time he did not have a supporter in the place. There were shouts from all over the room of - "It was not knocked down." "Pull you head in, Tommy." "Put a sock in it, yer mug.", and so on. When the noise died down a little, Tommy Cave was still vehemently haranguing his neighbours who, tired of his antics, had drawn away leaving him in a circle of his own like the man who had forgotten to wash with Lifebuoy soap.

"Now hold on a minute; this picture has not been sold, it's still up for grabs, and the highest bid so far has been from Father Hartigan for ten smackers. For reasons of my own, I was going to knock his bid back, but I won't now, and if he hasn't got any money I'll lend it to him; mainly because I don't want my old china down here to get it for six.

Right, the bid stands at ten quid. Do I hear any further advance? No, Tommy," he said, "I didn't sell it to you, so stop going on about it. You're not going to get it unless you're the highest bidder."

There was a hubbub from the crowd, amplified by the corrugated iron walls of the room and augmented further by the raving and shouting of the disgruntled dealer. The general feeling was that Tommy Cave was on to something; he had been commissioned to go to a good price for the painting but with his usual ineptness had made a mess of the task. His good friends, the dealers, were now considering speculatively how far they could run him up in the bidding.

Big Fred Dorman dropped the price of twenty pounds into the ring. With an audible groan Tommy raised the bid to twenty one. Fred Dorman was about to turn the screws by offering twenty five when the man in the grey dust-coat called out, "Thirty."

Tommy's jaw dropped but he managed to croak through trembling lips, "Thirty one." This gained him no respite because his opponent, without pausing, responded with a bid of "Forty". Tommy glared at his tormentor and managed to cry, "Forty one."

The crowd had gone quiet again at the sight of this interesting tussle and the man in the dust-coat was about to bid again when they were all distracted by a sudden stir at the door and a voice inquiring loudly, "Has it been sold yet? Am I too late?" The newcomer was a bearded middle-aged man in a rumpled business suit, who had just burst in.

"What are you after?" inquired Barney.

"That's what I want," said the man when he saw the painting Don was holding. "It was in the Epsworth estate and they told me someone from your firm bought it at the executors auction. I didn't know the old lady had passed on and the estate sold up until today; I'm glad I tracked you down. Am I too late to bid?"

"No, you'd better have a good look. Pass it to him, Don." The man reached out and for the second time the picture was handed over for examination. The man nodded as the picture was returned, and he put away his glasses. "How much?"

"I don't know, it hasn't been sold yet, and I got plenty more down the back if you're making a collection. What were we up to? Fifty quid I think."

It was now the turn of the man in the dust-coat to look sour, which he did, "Make it a hundred," he said.

Barney nearly fell off his chair at this offer, but his astonishment was even greater when Tommy Cave followed up with a nearly inaudible bid of one hundred and one pounds."

There was a pause while everyone digested the events of the past few minutes. Tommy Cave pressed close to Barney's chair.

"Knock it down quick, Barney," he pleaded. "I tell you straight my limit was a hundred quid, I shouldn't have gone a penny more. Be a pal, Barney, it's for an old lady that's got a sentimental attachment for the picture."

"You miserable little prawn," retorted Barney. "You tried to steal it off me for six quid! The only sentimental attachment you've got is for money. Tommy, you're that low you could walk under a snake with your umbrella up and you wouldn't even tickle its belly."

The bidders were now trying to attract Barney's attention. The late-comer snapped his fingers. "Pay attention please, one hundred and fifty pounds." He turned and waved pleasantly to the man in the dust-coat. "Good-afternoon Claude, sorry to spoil your day for you."

Claude returned a sour glance in response to this greeting; if looks had been lethal he and Tommy Cave would have assassinated this man on the spot. "Two hundred," he said glumly.

"What is going on here?" demanded Barney in astonishment. "This thing must be diamond studded, or else you two are crackers. You did say two hundred pounds? Not Weetie box tops, or cigarette cards?"

"He said two hundred pounds and meant it. Now cut out the commentary and take his bid so I can make mine -- two fifty."

For just once in his life Barney O'Connell was lost for words. He stood on his chair and stared at the bidders. Tommy Cave stamped around raising his own little dust cloud and gnawing at his fingers.

The stranger looked inquiringly across the room at Claude, every eye followed his; no one noticed that Tommy might possibly burst.

Claude glared back, then at Barney, he lifted a finger, "Three hundred," he said

"Three-fifty!" said the stranger instantly. "Lost your nerve yet Claude?" he inquired conversationally across the room. "It's still a very nice little investment."

He was right. After a few seconds concentration, during which everyone waited with stilled breath, Claude nodded to bring the bidding to four hundred pounds. Attention swivelled

instantly, but without pausing the stranger nodded to Barney signifying another fifty pound advance. He looked quizzically to see what Claude's next move might be.

Claude pondered momentarily. "That was my limit, four-fifty," he said, "But I reckon yours was a good deal higher, judging by the way you're grinning. Alright I'll make you pay a bit more -- four seventy-five."

"Five hundred," retorted the stranger.

Claude shook his head, shrugged and turned away.

Everyone except Claude, Tommy Cave, and Barney clapped and cheered as Barney chanted the ritualistic words, "going, going, gone! Sold to the gentleman near the door for five hundred pounds, and a very cheap picture it is too."

"Don't talk rubbish," said the buyer, "you are totally ignorant of culture or art. You would have knocked the picture down for nothing if Claude and I had not been here. Anyone who can leave the apostrophe out of Barney's Auctions is an ignorant Philistine."

"Have it your own way, but we'll want a good deposit."

"I won't pay you a deposit. No deposits."

"That's O.K., we'll sell it to your mate instead."

"You won't do that either because I will pay for it in cash, now."

"You mean you'll pay good cash money, on the nail?"

"My word I will. No matter what you may think, Mr Auctioneer, I know I have a bargain here. In a few years this will be a national treasure and I'm not letting it out of my sight."

Barney gestured with his thumb for Kathleen to go with the man to the office and collect his money.

Don was smirking broadly. "If you want me to take charge of the art-department Barney, just say so! I'll buy all your pictures for you."

"Worst bloody thing that ever happened," said Barney sourly. "You'll break me over this! You're like a mug punter that has a lucky win and reckons he can keep on doing it."

"Go on, Kath, go and get the bloke's money, then you can help Maggie. We've still got an auction to run." Barney had remembered that not only had the success of the picture committed him to keeping on two troublesome employees but also the profit just made was to be split between Father Hartigan and Don.

The buyer paid with five bundles of ten pound notes watched by a breathlessly excited Kathleen. He clutched his precious picture and hurried out of the auction room followed by the complaints of Tommy Cave, who was now threatening Barney with an action in the Supreme Court for the recovery of the picture and some treasure trove.

"We can get married on our half share," exclaimed Kathleen, catching Don and kissing him vigorously. Don put his hands over his heart and staggered back, coughing weakly, while his delighted friends thumped him on the back "It's me old 'eart," he said, "you shouldn't spring stuff like that on me without warning; made me poor old ticker nearly turn over. Oo's got me tablets?"

It was all play. There was nothing wrong with his heart and Barney was bawling out for him to come back and start working again as a storeman. But no one was paying attention. The crowd was divided between Tommy Cave, his ravings, and the happy little group congratulating the couple.

Father Hartigan was saying, "Don't you worry Don, my boy, I'll marry you up good and tight, I'll give you and Kathleen the best ceremony possible under the circumstances. Of course if you want to convert to the true faith, it will be even better."

Though agreeable to the idea of being married, Don had considered it as something vague and a good way off in the future; now it was suddenly upon him. This windfall of two hundred and fifty pounds, together with their combined savings, now made the whole thing possible.

"He's taken aback, poor lad!" said Tom Neerim, "Here, catch an arm, Chip." They took an elbow each, and lifting him off his feet carried him back to his boss.

"Here you are, Barn.," said Tom, "Treat him gently for a while. Women don't know what a terrible strain an engagement is for a man. Look after him, pal, until he recovers."

"I'll look after him alright," retorted the unsympathetic Barney, "with the toe of me boot. If you've finished horsing around, Don, let's get on with the auction."

It was easier to say that than do it. Most of those present were dealers or at least experienced auction-goers, but they had never seen such a thing before. They were certainly not artistic, being more interested in dealing in furniture and household chattels, and before the auction most of them would have shared Barney's opinion of the picture, without being so loud about it.

To see such an item of Australian art bring a high price was a revelation to them and the rapid rise in the value of Australiana so noticeable after the war was dated in Melbourne from that time.

Tommy Cave followed the stranger out to his car to plead with him, but it was no use. He now appeared briefly and distractedly by the door in order to shake his fist at Barney and shout threats of legal action before darting off again and disappearing.

They got through the auction somehow and after the excitement had died away and the last lot had been sold Fred Dorman, on his way out, saw Kathleen. He stopped for a moment to chat with her. "That was a turn up for the books, Kath. I've never seen anything like it. When I get home I'll have to go through my stock of pictures; you never know your luck in a big city. But that old man of yours, he's smarter than I thought. He told me the picture was his. How would he know to buy a picture like that. I thought he'd be the last character to know anything about art."

Chapter – 15

With no more casual work available and the picture safely sold, Tom Neerim and Chip Dowd concentrated on the demolition job. They were there every day from just after dawn until it was time to down tools and depart for the pub.

A large fire burned all the time on the block during working hours; it was fed with wooden entrails ripped out of the old house. Burning brightly all day it consumed the eighty year history of the Sturgess home and the honest workmanship of a builder who had emigrated to Australia all those years ago to help build a new country.

Albert from next door came in too, after he had been breakfasted and warmly clad by his granddaughter. Every day he appeared about the same time and started to help feed the fire, taking over from Freddy who was now working full time at the auction room. The old man had tried two or three times to assist with the demolition but was a menace to himself and the others so they gently made him stop and do something else. They even gave him a few shillings a week for his nominal help, and he was delighted. It had been many years since he had earned any money, even token amounts like this.

The Moreton Bay Fig Tree sturdily resisted destruction. The tree-fellers took to it with axe and chain-saw, shovel and bar, but it was so stubborn that finally the contractor had to pay Tom and Chip to assist in the final dismemberment, and digging out the surface roots.

At last it was gone and only the freshly churned earth, the hole where it had stood, and a few bricks from the path marked the battle it had put up for life. On a far away tip the tree bole sullenly resisted its final destruction by fire.

On the day the tree was destroyed a letter arrived from Queensland; In a quiet period after the tree-feller had carted away the carcass they sat down to consider it. It was from Jim. This was one of several that had passed between them as they cleared up their queries and differences before committing themselves to moving to Queensland. Everything had been answered, there were houses for them, rough perhaps, but sufficient. There were schools nearby for the children. The local town was attainable by bus so their wives could go shopping weekly, and there was work for the men; enough work for six awaited them on the pineapple farm.

They read it aloud to Albert, who listened wistfully and threw the occasional twig on the fire while he pondered on the contents of the letter.

"I know what I'd do if I was a young like you blokes and had this chance, I'd be off like a hairy goat," he said. "It's the sort of thing you grab with both hands; you two could be the pineapple kings of Australia inside ten years."

"We could be broke inside twelve months, too," said Tom Neerim.

"We're broke now, what's the diff. whether we're broke in Victoria or Queensland? I say we won't get a chance like this again, let's go!"

"You're right, Chip, have a go," urged Albert. "If it was me they wouldn't have to ask me twice. Now listen, I'll tell you something. I got fifty quid stuck away in a cocoa tin the family hasn't found yet. If I chuck in the fifty quid, how about taking me with you? I reckon I'd like to see Queensland again before I snuff it; it must be thirty years since I was in Brisbane last. I enlisted in the Light Horse from there too."

"Did you fight with the Light Horse?"

"No such luck. The top brass found out I'd been in mining before the war. So they put me in with the Sappers and Miners. Me and the Germans spent the rest of the war trying to blow one another up."

Tom gently put his hand on the old man's arm. "Look Albert, we can't take you, you know that. A thousand mile trip in these old rattletraps of ours would kill you for sure; you're no spring chicken any more - besides, your granddaughter would have us put away for cradle snatching and you'd wind up down here again without your fifty quid."

"Yair, I know," said the old man glumly. "I've enjoyed being with you blokes these past few weeks and I know I'll never leave Melbourne again, but it was nice just thinking about one last fling. When this job cuts out, and I can see it's going to any day now, you two'll piss off up to Queensland with your families, then I'll be left down here like a shag on a rock. Ah well, I'll just go back to me veranda, and sit in the sun, and wait for the undertaker to call. This is the end of the track as far as I'm concerned."

"Turn it up, Albert. It's enough to give a man the Jim Brits to hear you going on like this. We'll write to you every now and then, and tell you how we're gettin' on in pineapple country. Though I tell you what, seeing you're right and there's only about half a day's work to clean up the block, you can come with us down to the pub tonight. We'll get you home about seven. Do you want to nick inside and ask if you can go with us?"

Albert's face lit up like a lamp at this offer. "I'll ask her bloody nothing. If I did she'd probably hide me strides on me, or something like that, so I couldn't go. She's not a bad kid, you know, but she's like all women. She doesn't understand that a man has to go down to the pub at least once a week; it's the only place to be. But don't forget, I'm shouting. You boys have been very good to me. Maybe if I buy a bag of peppermints in the lolly-shop afterwards, she might not know where I've been; she might not be able to smell the beer on me breath."

"Some hope!" said Chip Dowd.

Chapter - 16

George the blacksmith, former owner of Barney's lately acquired property, had been wrestling with his conscience for some time: it was an uneven contest.

He was an honest man and his conscience now forced him up from where he had been sitting. He went in to face Barney O'Connell with a confession.

He found Barney wrestling with a problem of his own. He and Don were disputing as to what should be done with the old steam engine. They discovered, after some inquiry, that the scrap metal merchant was willing to buy the machine at scrap metal price, but only if it was delivered into his yard. His truck had broken down, or so he said. Barney, in spite of Don's requests to sell it for scrap, wanted to inch it out through the back door with levers and rollers and leave it with the bren-gun carrier wheels until a buyer turned up who wanted an obsolete stationary donkey engine. Don's opinion was that they were not likely to find anyone that stupid for the rest of the century. There was only one person in Melbourne silly enough to buy the great log of a thing and he already owned it.

Don wanted to push it outside on the nature strip so Neerim and Dowd to haul it away. Barney contended that if left outside someone might steal it, and Don's retorted that if anyone was mad enough to steal it they deserved to have it.

The only thing agreed on was that the machine could not be left where it was in the entrance, a menace to the traffic. They had nearly killed themselves getting all the goods out past it after Wednesday's auction.

The debate was still unresolved when George came in and asked to see Barney privately. Barney dropped his pinch-bar in the dirt and they walked outside.

"What's wrong, old son?" inquired Barney, "You look as though you'd lost a guinea and found threepence. Come on, you can tell your uncle Barney."

"It's about this property, Barney! I'm giving you a chance to back out; you can call it off if you want to. You see, I don't want to hold you to a bad deal."

"Meaning what?"

"Well, something's come up. It was nice having the money in the bank, seeing I've had next to nothing there all my life; but you say the word, Barney, and you can have it back again today."

"I don't know what you're going on about, me boy, but you'd better believe this, we made a deal and I'm not ratting on it and neither are you. I've got a receipt to prove that this place is mine. What happened, did someone make you a better offer?"

"No, no, it's not that, Barney. It's nothing like that at all; it's just that something came up and I've got to tell you about it."

"Well, tell me. Don't keep me in suspenders, what's going on?"

"It's like this. The council have been sending me letters about this place, and one of the council blokes came to see me a fair while ago."

"This getting exciting! I hope they were nice letters, and you did the right thing by them. I've been getting letters too; if you like I'll give you some of mine and you can send those to the council. That should keep them busy for a while."

"No, Barney. I didn't do anything about the letters because I hoped the council would forget all about it, and I didn't have any money to do the place up anyway. It looks as though I left it too long because the same bloke from the council came in about half an hour ago and served me with a demolition order on the buildings. The order says they're not up to scratch as far as the council is concerned, something to do with the building regulations, and I have to pull them down and start again."

"The pack of rotten shiny bums!" said Barney, examining the document, a form in which the particulars of name address and date had been filled in with ink. The meaning was quite plain, the owner of the said buildings had a certain time within which to comply with the order and demolish the said buildings, or else be summoned before a court to be further dealt with.

"Can you imagine it?" exclaimed Barney. "This mob of no-hopers sit behind their desks all day polishing their pants and interfering with people who are trying to earn a living. No wonder the country's on the greasy slide to hell."

"Well, Barney," said Mr Wilson. "I suppose it's my fault for not doing something about it earlier, and I should have told you before you bought the joint, but if you want your money back just say the word. I guess I can sell it to someone as a block of land."

Barney patted him on the back. "Don't you worry about a thing; if it had been me I would have ignored the drongos too. You keep the money. As far as I'm concerned the deal is still on. All you and the missus have to do is decide how to spend your dough; you leave me to deal with the council. Anyway, I'm crook on them; why should they give you the demolition order on the property when it's not yours at all, it's mine?"

"I suppose Wilkie hasn't notified them yet. I don't think he was too happy when I couldn't find the deeds to the property. He was scratching his head a bit when I saw him last. Anyway I have to go to his office tomorrow to sign a whole lot of papers about it. I don't know what the missus could have done with those things. I thought that they'd be safe enough. She thought so too. Last time I saw them they were on the mantel piece stuck behind the clock. Another thing too, he said we might have to employ surveyors if the department has to issue a new set of title deeds."

"What's the problem? Everyone knows that you've owned this property for years. And Wilkie knows that I've bought it. I'll ring again tomorrow and see if I can put a rocket under him. This talk about surveyors is bloody nonsense."

After studying the demolition order a while Barney's face lightened. "Look, these poons have outsmarted themselves, they've served you with the order when it should have been me. When the time limit's up and they come round to see what's going on I'll just say, "what order?" and they'll have to start all over again."

"That will give you double the time - so what; it just postpones the day when they start pulling the place down, or you'll have to. It's gotta come down in the end. They might knock it down and then send you a bill for the work!"

"It gives me time to clean the place up. I think I'll give it a lick of paint. I've got those five gallon drums of camouflage paint I bought at auction the other day. If I run some of that

over the front, it will help to tidy it up a bit. It's sort of olive green; I think they used it up in New Guinea for painting tanks and stuff like that."

"I dunno, Barney, I don't think that painting the place olive green will help much. The council just wants to get rid of these old sheds, no matter what colour they are."

"But they've been here for years, why would they want them down now?"

"I guess they let things like that go during the war, and a few years afterwards. If you knocked a building down there was no way of replacing it. All the factories were turning out stuff for the war, and nothing for us. Still, I gotta admit they're bloody ugly buildings, though I didn't think so at the time, when I put them up".

Barney patted him on the back. "Your money's safe enough, old feller. I don't want it back. I'll battle it out with the council and see what happens. Even if the sheds go down I still want the land. There are big opportunities here.

Don was as stubborn as his boss. In Barney's absence he had decided to inch the donkey engine out through the front door. He and Freddy, with occasional assistance from Kathleen, were labouring with lever and roller to get it outside and on to the nature strip before the return of the master.

The machine, with its flue, stood about ten feet high. It was an antique and looked as though it dated from the earliest years of steam power. Watt or Stevenson may have considered it of modern design, but no one since their day would have thought it other than obsolete. It was a wood-fired unit and may have been used on the Victorian gold field mining operations of the nineteenth century.

On one side was a flywheel that ironed out any fluctuations between piston strokes, on the other was the driving wheel that could power other machinery with an endless flat leather belt. None of this worked anymore.

The top four feet of the machine was of no particular weight because it consisted of a flue that had been cut at the top into spikes and flared outwards: the rest was made up of a rusty boiler and cylinder, all very heavy.

Something clanked inside the entrails of the old engine when the wheel was laboriously turned by hand. Everything else seemed to be seized up with rust.

The door of the auction room was just high enough for the flue to pass underneath without snagging on the lintel, and the machine was actually a few feet outside the door when two of the immensely strong stubby legs that supported the base plate of the machine sank into a soft spot in the ground and the whole rusty mass tilted forward.

Freddy noticed this but Don did not because he had his head down at the time and a lever under the back edge ready to lift. Freddy ran in front of the machine with some idea of stopping it from toppling just as Don heaved on the back of the plate with his bar. The whole thing went over ponderously with a thump and pinned Freddy underneath. Kathleen screamed a warning but it was too late, the whole incident was over in a second.

Barney had the unfortunate attribute of being able to appear at the moment when something had just been broken or his presence was embarrassing. No sooner had the engine fallen over, and before Kathleen and Don had time to react, than he appeared round the corner and gazed at the fallen machine.

"And another doll down," he shouted. "Give the gentleman a cigar, the bigger they are the better he knocks them down."

Kathleen and Don crouched down on their knees and peered under the fallen engine. "Freddy's underneath that," said Kathleen.

"My Gawd," exclaimed Barney, "I can't turn me back on the place for a minute and you have to go and kill someone. What the hell am I going to tell his mum?"

They gazed in horror at the fallen, rusty mass. Don attempted to burrow underneath like a rabbit, searching for the hidden body.

"I'm alright," said a subterranean voice. It was indeed Freddy, the two wheels had saved him because they projected out beyond the diameter of the cylinder and had acted like road wheels supporting the weight of the machine; instead of it crushing him he was in a little hollow in the ground imprisoned, but otherwise unhurt.

"We thought you were a dead goner, Freddy," said Don, talking to him between the spokes of a fly-wheel. "I reckon we'll buy a ticket in Tatts between us and call it 'Lucky Boy'. Hang on a minute, mate, and we'll get you out of there."

"Leave him," said Barney. "At least I'll know where one of you is, and that'll be a load of me mind. I'll get another one for you, Don. It'd be worth it just to have the two of you filed away. Then, if I could get rid of Kathleen, I'd be a happy man."

He looked at his watch. "Well, he's on his lunch hour, at least he's not laying round on my time. I'm going to eat me own sandwiches now; I'll be back in about half an hour. Don't call me, I'll call you."

The donkey engine was too heavy to lift, even with the assistance of Mr Wilson who soon appeared when he heard the commotion next door. Freddy could not be hauled out through the spokes of the fly-wheel and they did not dare dig round the side of the machine because if one wheel was to sink into the hole he would be permanently flattened. The flue, now bent, was resting firmly against the earth so they could not get him out of the way, nor past the base plate which also rested on the ground.

A rapidly growing crowd began falling into factions, each with definite ideas about how to rescue the boy. One group wanted to borrow an acetylene torch from a garage and cut up the machine on the spot. It was pointed out by the opposition that sparks and molten metal would fall on Freddy who would be at the lowest point of this fiery activity. The answer to the problem was simple have buckets of water ready to dash water over him every time he caught fire. Another suggestion was for someone to crawl through the furnace door, which was facing upwards, and with a cold chisel and hammer cut a convenient opening through the back of the fire-box, Freddy could be rescued that way. This idea was discarded when it was pointed out that only an agile dwarf or a strong three year old child would be small enough to get inside the fire-box, let alone swing a hammer inside. Another man knew the telephone number of the best regarded tow-truck firm in Melbourne. He guaranteed that the jib-crane would lift the engine in a jiffy.

Tom Neerim and Chip Dowd arrived in their old utility while the discussion was raging. They had Albert with them and, as soon as he understood the situation, he became leader of yet another faction.

He had been, he said, for many years a miner in the Diamond Gully gold mine, add that to his wartime experiences and he was full bottle on the subject. What he didn't know about mining and sapping, so he explained at some length, was not worth knowing. The machine was supported by the two-wheels so that the base plate was just clear of the ground; Albert's suggestion was to get him out that way. If someone was to get shovels and picks he would supervise the sinking of a trench that would be driven under the base plate so that they could catch hold of Freddy and drag him out feet first.

Barney, who had come back when the argument was reaching a climax, soon knocked that idea on the head. He had no use for a trench dug in front of his premises which would have to be filled in and this would soften the ground and make loading and unloading even more laborious. Besides, Albert's solution would get Freddy out but would still leave the machine where it was and it could possibly sink into the trench.

"That's alright," said Albert, "no worries. If I had a proper team here we could dig a pit big enough to bury the thing where it is. Until it rusted through," he added, "Then you might have a problem. because the ground'd subside -- but that wouldn't worry you. You'd be long gone."

"I don't want to bury the bloody thing, you silly old goat. I bought it to sell, not to bury."

Albert persisted. "What I don't know about mining and cutting trenches ain't worth knowing!" he asserted. "I was a sapper and miner in France for two years - blown up by the Germans three times. I been in some of the biggest mine disasters in Australia, too."

Barney was unimpressed "I'll bet you have. I suppose you caused them."

The person least concerned by all this was Freddy himself; he liked novelties and to lie there, and watch the legs of his would be rescuers as they moved around aimlessly, was quite agreeable. It would be an anecdote worth telling his friends The ground was soft and reasonably warm and he had a quite legitimate excuse for lying down and letting others do all the thinking and working for him. He cheerfully munched a sandwich that Kathleen handed down to him in his earthy prison.

Tom Neerim and Chip Dowd, practical men, silenced all discussion as to means by finding some ten foot lengths of hardwood left over from the fence repair operations. Two of these they forced under the flue. Then as many people as could crowd round got a hand-hold on the lengths of timber on both sides of the machine and at a word from Tom they all lifted together. As soon as the body of the donkey engine was clear of the ground another piece of timber was slipped under that and more people were able to assist in the lift. Within a second, after a tremendous effort, they had it almost upright.

There was a near disaster for several people trod on Freddy and he started to roar and roll about amidst their feet. The whole thing was tottering and on the point of falling again when Tom Neerim rallied the troops by out-shouting Freddy and they were able to finish the lift and get Freddy out at the same time. He limped off covered in dirt and boot-marks.

Everyone moved back respectfully for the machine was standing, albeit rather drunkenly, and ready to topple at the merest touch. It could not be left where it was a tottering menace. Though on Barney's land it could easily fall across the footpath and kill some passerby: Barney surveyed it and the crowd with growing irritation.

"Thanks! Don, thanks a lot!" he said, "that's exactly where I wanted it, just in the right position to fall over on someone and drive them into the ground like a tack. Whoever it is I only hope it kills him outright, otherwise I'll be sued for a million pounds damages. I don't know what's come over the place lately; of all the splaw-footed, bumble-fingered, incompetent dills a man has to put up with you just about take the bun. Gawd strike me civil, I'd be better off running the place on me own! I couldn't even guess what you wanted to bring it out here for, instead of doing what you were told."

"I wanted to get rid of it, that's what I wanted to do," shouted Don. "It was your idea to buy the rotten great thing in the first place."

"It wasn't my idea to rig it up like a booby-trap to belt someone over the head with a ton of machinery. It's about time you grew up, Don. Wouldn't you like to go and work for someone else for a change?"

For answer Don furiously ripped off his carrier's apron, balled it up, and threw it on the ground at Barney's feet. "I've had a gutful of you, Barney," he said. "You can just stick this the same place as your job. I'll be round tomorrow for me wages and that's the last you'll see of me. There are dozens of places I can go to get a job that will be better than working in this stinking old ruin you call a business. You're the meanest bastard I've ever met; and as tight as a fish's arse. You won't spend two bob on the place. If we had a decent concrete floor this never would have happened."

The crowd was greatly interested in this quarrel, and applauded Don's resignation, but Kathleen was appalled. She was going to lose Don after so painfully working her way into an official position with the auction room. She had bright plans for gradually improving the image of the business with a general rebuilding and upgrading program in spite of Barney's eccentric behaviour, and now everything would be spoiled if Don walked out.

Barney himself regretted having let his tongue run on too far with this unexpected result, but he would not compromise or apologise, he continued to eye Don stonily.

Tom Neerim tried to act as a peace-maker between the two men. He caught them each by an arm. "Now come on, you blokes," he said, "let's go down to the pub and talk it over. We'll have a quiet jar or two and when you've cooled off it will all come out funny. Tomorrow you'll have a good giggle over this."

Barney shook his hand off. "You're as bad as he is," he retorted. "How the hell can I go away and leave the Leaning Tower of Pisa hanging over the footpath? We're not all stupid, irresponsible drongos, you know."

"That's enough, Dad," broke in Kathleen angrily. "There's no need to keep going on like an idiot. You're impossible; Don was only trying to help, it wasn't his fault that the thing fell over and I tell you straight, if Don goes I go too."

"Hold it! Hold your horses!" shouted Tom. "We'll just get this sorted out before anyone else resigns. Now Barney's right, Don. You can't go off and leave him stuck with this rotten great engine out here, so I'll tell you what we'll do. As a gesture of peace and good-will and, I might add, for nix, the firm of Neerim and Dowd will help you move the old sod to wherever you want to go. Now, where is it to be?"

"I know where I would like to drop it," said Barney, glaring at Don, "but they would put me in jail just as if I'd done it to a real man. That was a good machine once, it was saleable, but just look at it now; not worth a crumpet."

He was right; the flue had been severely bent when the machine fell over, and some of the rivets had pulled out of the collar that attached it to the top of the fire-box. Even in the unlikely event of a buyer turning up, its value had been sadly diminished by the accident. Also the pressure gauge had been knocked off. "What you can do," said Barney, "is take it up to the scrap metal merchant, we'll never sell it otherwise, not the way it is now. Any price you can get will be better than nothing."

"You're joking," was Chip Dowd's comment. "You try and put that on Liz's back and she'll never stir again. The weight would flatten out the springs and force the tray down on top of the tyres; we've got Buckley's hope of shifting the donkey engine on our old chuffer, though if you like we'll nick back to the house and get the tip truck."

He was right, the old vehicle was too frail to carry that mass of rusting machinery on its back. They were at an impasse until Don made his first good suggestion for the day. His idea was to back the utility over and then lower the flue only onto the tray. The flue itself could then be lashed to the truck and the donkey engine could run behind like a trailer with the fly-wheel and driving wheel acting as road wheels. There being no better suggestion, they tried this. The utility was backed up over the bald nature strip and they eased the steam engine over carefully so that the top of it was supported on the old wooden tray.

The lashing down of the flue was soon done because Albert, who also claimed to have been a rigger, was able to supervise and tie some workmanlike knots. He was careful to ensure that the load could swivel, otherwise the strain might be too much and the ropes would snap as they turned a corner.

"Now," said Tom, "Once we get her on the road she'll be apples. Chip, you get in and be ready to give her the gun and we'll all get behind the donkey engine and push. Kath, you stand on the gutter and keep an eye on the traffic. As soon as you see a break give us the office, because when we come out we'll come out like a cork out of a bottle, and we don't want to collect anyone on the way."

Tom started the truck ready, and it began to chug, and clank, and rattle, while the men gathered round waiting for Kathleen's signal before leaping into activity. After a few minutes there was a pause in the almost constant stream of traffic past the door. She excitedly waved them on. Tom slipped the vehicle into first gear and lifted the clutch pedal. All the men, like some heroic group, strained at the wheels and braced themselves against the bottom of the donkey engine. For a moment they swayed back and forth struggling to push the fly-wheels out of the dirt while the old Dodge roared and one of its back wheels spun in a cloud of blue smoke. Suddenly it was away, the machine lurched up out of the little depression it had made while the truck wheels skidded then gained traction leaving black marks on the footpath.

As the donkey engine crashed its way over the footpath and down into the gutter the base plate ripped away some of the bluestone gutter kerbing, but the machine had too much momentum to be stopped. Chip swung wide over to the other side of the road and paused for a minute while Tom dashed across and hopped into the cabin. Albert hobbled across and they pulled him in too.

The two wheels were different sizes so so the load was lop-sided and the drive wheel was loose and wobbled as the donkey engine bounced off in the direction where the scrap metal merchant had his business. Something clanked and chugged as the flywheel turned and loud clanking noises startled passersby.

The utility vibrated and rattled even more than usual shaken wildly by the engine swaying from side to side as it was hauled along the road. Every now and then the front wheels of the Dodge tended to rise slightly off the road. The main weight of the load was too far back behind the rear wheels. Chip could be seen struggling to keep the rig more or less to the left of the road. As they started to veer to one side or the other he would have to slam hard on the brakes to bring the front wheels down so that he could control the direction of the vehicle. Clanking and swaying madly they receded into the distance. Barney stared after them. For a moment he forgot his quarrel with Don. He muttered, "If the Bulls catch up with those jokers they'll be gone a million."

The three men came back in a surprisingly short time, about twenty five minutes after leaving and Barney eyed them moodily as the old Dodge pulled up outside his premises. The donkey engine had disappeared from the back of the utility, all except the chimney which was still tied in place, but almost crushed.

They climbed out of the cabin to face him.

"You got rid of it alright?" remarked Barney.

"Yair, no trouble at all; she came off like a beauty."

"What did you get for it?"

"Nothin'."

"What do you mean, nothing? Didn't I tell you to sell the flaming thing?"

"That's right, Barney, you did, but something went wrong on the way. We were just heading off to the scrap metal joint like you told us when Albert thought he spotted a patrol car coming down the road. So, not wanting to cop a ticket right now for getting around with an unroadworthy donkey engine tied to the back of the truck, we decided to nick round the block and go by way of some of the back streets. We were just doing a wheelie round the corner into Mayblossom Street when it happened."

Barney put his hand to his forehead and closed his eyes resignedly. "Go on!"

"That was it! You remember one of them wheels was a bit wobbly. Well, that was the one that came off, and the flue broke away from the engine and the whole kit and caboodle fell into the middle of the road, and the wheel passed us because Chip slammed on the brakes, and the wheel smashed someone's front fence, and it knocked over a concrete stork, and fell into a fish pond, and I don't think it would have done the fish much good. Look, Barney, if you want your donkey engine back, you'll find it lying in the middle of Mayblossom Street, but you will have to go and get it yourself because Chip and me resigned as your carriers ten minutes ago."

"Oh Gawd," complained Barney, "that's lovely, isn't it? Did anyone see all this happen?"

"I don't know if they saw it, Barney, but they bloody-well heard it. We made enough racket when we were coming but when she fell off the back of the utility it was like an explosion in an iron foundry. If it didn't wake up the street, nothing would. Chip and me haven't heard anything like it since the Japs were pasting us with their artillery. It's a wonder you didn't hear the racket from where you are."

"This is getting beyond a joke, every move I make someone gets me into more trouble. I ought to pay you characters to stay away from the place, I'd be a damn sight better off; anyway what did you do when all this happened?"

"Well, Barney, we did what any red-blooded Australians would do under the circumstances, same as we did in New Guinea. We shot through like a Bondi tram. Chip and me and Albert got the hell out of there just as fast as old Liz would take us. If you want to go down to Mayblossom Street and ask for your engine back, you go right ahead, we wouldn't dream of stopping you. Chip and me might sneak down about midnight and wipe our fingerprints off it, but that's all we're going to do."

"It'll be alright," said Albert. "Someone from the council can put red lights round it for tonight. If you like Tom and Chip can take me round there after tea and I'll organize all the blokes in the street to get together and I'll show them how to push the engine over into the gutter for the night. You wouldn't have any spare pinch bars in the place, would you, and a block and tackle?"

"That's alright about you," retorted Barney, ignoring Albert, "But someone's going to dob me in; there must have been hundreds of people who saw the thing in the auction. And what

about the people who helped to load it onto your truck tonight? If any of them hear about this, I'm a goner; you blokes are getting me deeper into the poo all the time."

"That's alright, Barney, all you have to do is deny everything. They might put you away in Pentridge for a while but visiting days are every other Thursday. You'll get lots of people out to see you; some of them could do with a laugh. And we'll send you a copy of the War Cry now and then so you can do some reading in your cell. They tell me it's like a holiday home out there and the three months should go by in a flash. Anyway, tell them to prove it was your engine; there must be plenty of upright reciprocating steam engines with double wheels around; it could have been any of them."

Barney gloomily contemplated the troubles that were gathering around him. Everywhere he looked someone was about to make an attempt on his property or money. Now this impossible engine was lying in the middle of Mayblossom Street, a further source of problems, and from the attitude of the contractors he knew it was going to stay there.

"Come on, Barney," suggested Chip, breaking his silence. "Come on down to McWhinney's with us and sink a few; it'll help you forget your troubles."

Barney was despondent. "I've had a rough trot lately," he grumbled, "It looks as if I'll have a couple of writs out against me; I missed out badly on that picture; there's a demolition order on the building; Don is leaving, and now you come and tell me that bloody engine is scattered all over one of the back streets. I know you can't win 'em all, but I would like to win at least one of them."

"Yair, bad luck seems to hang around you like a cloud. Are you sure you didn't run over a Chinaman when you were getting the blitz buggy out of their paddock? They say if you kill a Chinaman you'll never have good luck again. There might be something in it, you know; lately you've been in more strife than Flash Gordon --"

He would have said more but his attention was taken by a silent file of Chinese men who appeared to have been called into being by his words. They marched past them hardly looking at Barney as they did so.

Two of them were carrying a brazier between them. They set it down on the space between the front of the auction room and the footpath and then crumpled newspaper and kindling into the bowl. One of the men put a match to the mixture which gradually began to blaze.

"They're going to burn your place down!" exclaimed Chip Dowd delightedly.

However the intentions of the intruders were more peaceable than that. They did nothing more than sit down quietly in a ring with the brazier in the middle and gaze at it and several rested their backs against the front wall.

"What's going on here?" demanded Barney; "what are you up to?"

No one answered; instead they gazed at the fire.

They had brought food which was taken out of packets and put into a wok. They cut up vegetables and meat.

"I haven't seen them do that since I was in Singapore," said Don who had not yet left. "When we were on leave we used to see them cooking their food out in the open like this. It wasn't too bad either. I wouldn't mind hanging around to see if there was anything going. I could use a bit of Chinese food meself."

One of the market gardeners who understood his remarks inclined his head gravely and indicated with his hand that they should sit on the ground and wait until the food was ready.

"That's alright about you: but what are they doing in front of my place? I'm not running a Chinese doss-house, said Barney. "Just what do you want here?"

Kathleen appeared too. She had been waiting for everyone else to go so she could give her father a heated lecture about his treatment of Don. She forgot about this and listened instead.

"Now, look! Said Barney This is my property, I own it! And I don't want you jokers hanging around here making it look untidy. You clear off back to your own place or I'll call the police." He waited, baffled, after this demand until a man who had his back to the front of the building, and seemed to be the youngest of the group had mastered English pretty well and now he addressed Barney.

"You owe us money," he said. "We lose our hens, we lose our vegetables, we have many troubles. You give us £100 we go away. If you do not pay we will not go. We can stay here a long, long time."

One of the Chinese had appointed himself cook and everyone intently watched his small, neat actions as he prepared the food.

"You are all welcome to join us," said the man. "We will sit here night and day until you heed our just demands."

This statement inspired Chip to an unusual level of eloquence. "They're very honest people, Barney." He said. "You can go away and leave them as long as you like; they won't touch anything. Actually it's better than having watch-dogs: no one's going to rob your place if they have to carry everything out over the heads of a bunch of chows."

"We are not 'Chows' " said the young man. "We are Han Chinese, guests in your country, and will leave with happy memories of our time here, if we are not referred to as Chows."

"You'll stay there a bloody long time before you get any dough out of me. I'm sorry about your vegies and the chooks and the fences but it wasn't me did the damage. why don't you go and find the kids that did it all."

"We don't know them, but we know you, and we know you left the monster engine out in the open and put temptation in the way of the young. Every man must bear his own burdens in this life and yours is to pay us for the damage we have suffered."

Freddy, who had recovered from being nearly extinguished by the steam engine, had been listening to this conversation. "You got a problem there, Barn," he said cheerfully. "I think you'd better pay up; they might sit outside you place for years and years. There's nothing like the Chinese for holding a grudge."

Chip Dowd was inspired again, "Yair, Freddy was telling me before, they're handy with a shiv, too; they can cut you up as quick as anything. I wouldn't go too close if I was you Barney. Once they've whipped out their knives you've had it. Freddy says they can carve you up real artistic."

"Tell Freddy to shut up! will you."

Matters had reached an impasse. The little group of Chinese showed no sign of violence; instead they sat cross-legged and placid on the ground, warmed by the brazier which was throwing out a pleasant heat. Within a minute or two the food would be ready for cooking.

"It is all arranged," stated the man who had spoken before and was now addressing Barney again. "There will be no violence but we will take it in turns, our younger men are to spend the night here; their elders will watch during the day. It will be a great shame to you before your neighbours and before heaven, because we will show that you do not pay what is due to those you have wronged."

"I've never wronged you and I don't owe you anything; so you can just sit there until the cows come home, or clear off, which would be even better."

This seemed to close the discussion and they returned to their interest in the actions of the cook.

"That's it Barn, said Freddy. "Looks as though you've got some permanent boarders. There's a picture on at the flicks right now, about the chows, sorry, - the Chinese. It's a real eye opener; you oughter go and see it. They can wait for years and years if they want to, and then strike with sudden, deadly venom."

Barney looked at his Chinese visitors and contemplated a rather glum future. Perhaps it would be worth while having the place demolished just to get rid of them.

The contractors were delighted to have another story to retail at the hotel but were conscious that the time was creeping on. "Well, we'd better push on. We gotta get Albert back home before his daughter starts ringing up the cops. They hesitated, rather sorry to leave the auctioneer in the midst of all these troubles." "What are you going to do now, Barn?"

Barney thought about his premises under the twin threats of siege and demolition; of the people after the money that had been found in the chest; of the preposterous steam engine smashed and abandoned in an otherwise quiet suburban street, and the troubles that were going to arise from the incident.

He was about to speak when a large truck pulled up at the front door. It was laden with coloured pressed steel baths, all second grade. At the factory they were still experimenting at pressing and enamelling kitchen and bathware products. Their failures were a rich source of stock for Barney.

He was pleased to see the truck and its promise of hard physical work to take his mind off his troubles. He was so relieved he forgot to complain to the driver about his tardiness.

The contractors got into their old vehicle to drive Albert to the pub. "O.K., Barn. See you later," they called out.

"Not if I see you first," he muttered while undoing the ropes tying down the load.

Chapter – 18

The next day after the accident with the donkey engine and the beginning of the oriental invasion was set aside for one of the Commonwealth Government's regular disposal auctions which had now been moved to a block of walled ground in Sunshine. Barney enjoyed pitting his wits against the auctioneer and meeting his cronies at the sales. The visits were, on the whole, profitable, and he did not want to miss any.

He had considered for a while whether to go to work and face up to his troubles or go to the auction and enjoy himself while buying fresh stock. The hesitation was brief and he was the first dealer into the market to look over the goods on display.

He particularly wished to be early that day as one of the lots to be offered consisted of 5000 sheets of 12' x 4' hardboard which at that time was hard to get. He and some other dealers would form a syndicate in order to buy the parcel of board and split it between them. Any of the men would have been glad to buy the entire 5000 sheets but they did not want to compete with each other and drive up the price. Better to buy a smaller lot cheap than the whole collection at too high a price.

Barney being absent, Don, who had agreed to stay another week, was left in charge of the business. The week's notice had been arranged by Kathleen who acted as go-between and

peace-maker. The two men had communicated through her and she had taken a number of liberties with their remarks so that in the end they sounded quite conciliatory.

She had worked hard to keep Don around for another week in the hope that something would turn up in the meantime to take the heat out of the quarrel.

Don was working inside when the policeman arrived but he had instructed Freddy to try and reset the blue-stone pitchers that made up the gutter kerbing. Some had been torn out when the steam engine was hauled away the night before.

He was doing this when the same policeman who had been sent to investigate the trouble with the blitz buggy rode up on his bike and dismounted on the footpath.

They greeted one another. The policeman knew Freddy of old. He had several times given him a clip over the ear, once a kick in the behind to teach him to respect other people's property.

"Barney O'Connell," said the policeman, "Is he here? I want to have a word with him."

"No, old cock, as a matter of fact he isn't, said Freddy. This is his day to go to the disposal sale so he probably won't be back until late afternoon. Is there anything you want to tell me?"

The policeman was about to open his mouth to rebuke Freddy for his familiarity when two elderly Chinese men who had just arrived bowed to him politely. They did the same to their friends and squatted on the ground. Two younger men who had been sitting there already rose stiffly, bowed, and went off. The policeman stared at this little ceremony in astonishment. "What's going on here? What are they up to?"

"I dunno; I think they're relations of Barney's. Anyway I suppose it's alright for them to sit there."

The policeman pushed back his helmet and scratched his head. "I wish I knew what was going on. There's been some strange things happening. Anyway if they're there by permission I guess it's alright; but if he wants them removed just say so."

"That's up to Barney. They're his mates."

The Constable dismissed the problem of the Chinese from his mind. "What I really wanted was to see O'Connell, but you might be able to help me. It was about some machinery that was dumped or fell off a truck in Mayblossom Street last night, did a lot of damage too. There are some unhappy people around there and they want to know who's going to pay for the damage?"

"So that's where it got to!" exclaimed Freddy. "That machine you're talking about, I bet it was a valuable steam engine that was stolen from here yesterday. We were going to ring you blokes up this morning and get D.24 on to the job, but now you're here you'll do. Things are crook when you can't go off and leave your property without having it knocked off during the night. That was a valuable engine, I hope they haven't damaged it."

The policeman got out his notebook and prepared to take down some details as Don came out to see what they were talking about. "Well, I dunno, it sounds the same one, but when I saw it didn't look too healthy to me. The residents said there were bits of it scattered all over the road after it fell off the truck, or whatever it was on. I know one of the wheels came off and bowled over a woman's front fence and smashed a concrete stork and ended up in a gold fish pond. Total damage-" He studied a figure in his notebook, "£55.12.6, that's only an estimate of course, but it doesn't count the damage to the road surface, which the council is going to fix up as soon as the machine is removed. They'll probably send in a bill too, when they find out who's going to get it. Anyway, I came round because some of the residents claimed this machine was sold at auction here. We've got to find out just what is going on. Oh, and about the lady that owns the stork and

the fish-pond. She's a cot-case this morning. The neighbours were telling me they've had a terrible night with her. She had an idea before that she was being persecuted by some-one from the auction-room. She said whoever it was had a valuable picture she inherited, and now they're starting on her in real earnest. The neighbours tell me she was half crackers before; now she's really round the bend. She kept some of them up half the night."

"We're not persecuting the old girl, whoever she is; and we wouldn't know anything about her picture." Don's heart sank. What if there was some doubt about the ownership of the painting that he had so triumphantly bought and sold.

The policeman's eyed them suspiciously and Don heard Freddy lead them deeper into trouble but could not decide whether or not to stop him and confess all.

"Some rotten tea-leaves must have pinched it when we were working in the auction room" said Freddy, "But they only got as far as Mayblossom Street before God caught up with them. And anyway, we wouldn't know anything about old ladies; we're in enough strife without picking on them too."

"The bloody thing must weigh a ton. How the hell could anyone knock it off from the front of the auction room without you noticing. They would have needed a crane to lift it."

"Er, yes, that's true." said Don, beginning to wish he had not come out to interview the policeman. Freddy could have told his stories without dragging Don in. "We didn't get any complaints because we knocked off a bit early last night. Some friends of ours are going to Queensland to live, and we went down to the pub to sink a few jars in honour of the occasion. You got any witnesses?"

"Ah, that's the trouble. No one saw the vehicle the thieves used though everyone in the street heard the crash. One or two women looked out of their front windows in time and said they saw an old car with wooden-spoke wheels and half the body missing belting down the road straight afterwards. But that couldn't have had anything to do with what happened; it was too small and it couldn't have taken the weight of the engine, though I'd like to question the driver about what he saw."

Don agreed so fervently with the proposition that the old car could have nothing to do with the event under discussion that he aroused doubts in the mind of the policeman. He was about to inquire further, when Tom and Chip appeared in their heavily laden tip-truck.

They got out, but did not want to face the law.

"You wouldn't believe it," said Don quickly, in order to forestall anything that the policeman might have to say, "But someone knocked off our donkey engine yesterday, then they went and dropped it in Mayblossom Street and broke it."

"Y' don't say! Well blow me tight, some people'd come at anything. It's a bit tough, isn't it, when you can't leave your donkey engine lying around without some low life coming along and half-inching it."

"Yair," said the constable moodily, "The whole story sounds fishy to me. None of the local crims I ever heard of would pull off a job like this. Don tells me it weighs about a ton and after seeing it I could well believe him. It beats me why anyone would want to do such a thing."

"Weighed a ton," said Tom Neerim. "My guess is that the rotten turds took it in a moment of weakness." For the first time he noticed the Chinese and waved to them airily; they bowed in return.

The constable ignored this exchange. "What you say doesn't leave me in much doubt that we're all talking about the same donkey engine. But I don't like the story and I'm not particularly interested in machinery. If it's yours I want it shifted and taken away and I want the damage in

the street made good. If these things are taken care of, I don't care about the council and its troubles. Tell Barney O'Connell he'll have to come up to the station and make an official complaint about the theft of the engine, that is if it is his. What you have to do, Don, is go straight down and identify the machine. The Council says that if it is still in the gutter tonight they are going to hang red lights out, but naturally they're not too rapt about the whole thing."

"That's alright," said Tom Neerim. "We'll borrow Charlie Frost's oxy-acetylene outfit and cut it up in the street and cart it down to the scrap metal joint for you when we get this load off."

Barney had sent a message through Kathleen reminding the staff they need not expect him that day, at least not until the auction sale had finished. She had a second message for the carriers; they were to be sitting on the door-step of the Sunshine auction depot the following morning waiting for it to open so that they would be first in to load his latest purchases.

It was plain that no matter what series of disasters, potential or actual were looming over the auction room they would have to wait until he had had his day of enjoyment at the disposal sale.

However the policeman was insistent on some action being taken to get the donkey engine identified and removed from his beat. After some wrangling they loaded his bike on the back of the tip truck and drove to Mayblossom Street. Don went too, leaving Kathleen and Maggie Spear to look after the business.

While identifying the wreckage and making a statement which was noted down in the official notebook the woman, whose fence and garden decorations had suffered in the previous night's mishap, came over and instantly began a long monologue aimed at the policeman.

The contractors left and came back in a short time with the oxy-acetylene outfit and some goggles ready to start cutting up the machinery

The victim backed the policeman up against the side of the truck and gazed at him disconcertingly through heavy glasses which magnified her staring eyes. She began a long, involved story of being cheated out of an inheritance in 1932. Somehow, by means not rationally explicable, she had connected the destruction of her fence, stork, and goldfish with another part of the plot to keep her out of her inheritance. Her story, however, lost any interest it might otherwise have had because she told it in a soft, unstoppable voice that the constable could barely understand.

He tried to interrupt several times but there were no pauses or paragraphs in her speech, only long, complicated sentences and parentheses that stretched on and on.

The contractors were delighted with this turn of events because the police constable, after a difficult ride in the tip truck, had begun to have what they thought was a nasty inclination to declare the vehicle unroadworthy. They would look up from their work now and then to say, "That's a good girl, tell him all about it,"

The woman, would smile vaguely and nod. They would urge the constable to take out his book to get a few facts down on paper. One or two of the neighbours looked on but did not come too near; it was plain they all knew the woman well.

As soon as the two men had adjusted the cutting flame and the sparks began to fly from where they were slicing up the boiler, Don decided to leave and walk back to work. The woman still had the policeman transfixed with her unblinking gaze and muttered her long tale of the wrong that had been done to her all those years ago.

"So long, Shaun, I'll see you," said Don to the policeman, digging him in the ribs. "You're doing a terrific job there. I'll ring the sergeant when I get back and tell him not to expect you today."

"You bastard, Don. You're not going to go off and leave me like this." He climbed on to the back of the truck and got his bike. "Now look, missus," he said, breaking into her flow of speech, "I have to go off now to prevent a murder."

"Whose murder?" she asked trembling, putting her fingers to her lips.

"Yours! If I don't get away quick anything is liable to happen."

"What will I do!"

"There is only one thing you can do. Do you see these blokes here?" indicating Tom and Chip, "they're detectives, plain-clothes men, and they've been sent to investigate your story. You stay here and tell them everything; they'll protect you and look into your case. Look after the lady," he said, mounting his bike. "She's a valuable witness; listen to every word she says and when she's finished write out a full report and post it to the Chief of Police, care of Russell Street, but whatever you do don't send it to us, it's too important." With a wave of his hand he rode away.

"That's right lady," advised Don, before he departed also. "Tell them every detail you can think of. If you start in about 1920 and work up gradually, you should be able to tell the whole story by about five o'clock. But don't leave out any details, they might be vital."

Chapter – 19

The following few days, as they wound up their affairs in Melbourne, the men were very busy. Chip Dowd and Tom Neerim were first in the queue of carriers waiting to load up at the Haymarket and were joined by Barney outside the gates half an hour before opening time. Barney had bought more than could be stacked on the three vehicles even with the ingenuity of the men in loading and tying. By the time everything had been carted, unloaded, and crammed into the buildings it was too late to go back that day and get what was left; they would have to return the following morning.

They told Barney of their plans to replace the woman's stork and her gold fish and repair the fence. "I'll pay for it," he grunted.

"Yair! You don't have to do that, Barn. It was our fault for driving too fast."

"That's alright; it was my bloody donkey engine. I've told you before; I take the profits round here, and if I take the profits I gotta take the losses too. Here's twenty quid." he took the money from his hip pocket and peeled off a note. "If there's any change out of that lot I want it. Just do the job as quick as you can; I want to get on with painting the front of the place and I want it finished by Monday."

After the camouflage paint had been applied liberally to the front of the building Tom insisted, in spite of Barney's protests, on taking some extra paint from stock and picking out the door and window frames in white so, as he put it, to give the place a touch of class. They even scraped and cleaned his windows as part of the service.

Finally there was nothing else for them in Melbourne. The auction room was painted; there was nothing more to pick up at Sunshine. They had made good their errors as best they could, the old house was down and Wilkie had paid them for their work.

It was all finished. The scrap timber burned to ashes. The rubble carted away and dumped on the new jetty-breakwater being built. The weathered paling sheds in the backyard were gone too, and the long grass stamped flat where the mouldering bits of iron junk had been dragged out and carted off to the scrap metal dealer.

The contractors had their two families loaded aboard the old trucks, their indispensable household goods, and a meagre supply of money, barely enough to get them through to Queensland if no problems arose on the way.

They were up early that day in spite of a howling north wind bringing heat from the inland, heat that would drive the temperature to new heights.

Soon after eight two old trucks rolled up and stopped outside the auction room, on the other side of the road. They were loaded, almost beyond capacity, with wives, children, and household goods too vital or too precious to be parted with. Everything else had been taken to the auction room on Sunday to be disposed of for the best price.

As they drew into the gutter both vehicles seemed to be panting on the edge of collapse. Strong shudders racked their bodies as the engines idled before being turned off. It seemed all that was holding them together was some tightly twitched baling wire on the bodies, and an intricately tied network of ropes that kept the loads from tumbling into the road.

The canvas and other covering they had put over their loads was flapping under the onslaught of the hot wind.

The trucks continued to creak and hiss quietly to themselves for a while even after the engines had been turned off. No one heard them. No one was listening, because the children were shrieking, and chattering, and swarming across the road to the auction room the instant they could do so. They ignored their parents who were shouting at them to be careful of the road.

Don was out front and saw the little procession arrive followed by the sudden eruption of children. He screwed up his face in mock terror and pretended to shoot himself in the temple as the human wave approached. "Look out!" he shouted through the front door into the interior of the building. "Run for your lives, the Martians have landed!"

The children knew him and were not timid but they were checked and overawed by the sight of an elderly oriental couple in Chinese garments sitting on a floral garden swing facing the road and sharing a painted outdoor table.

A primus stove was singing on the table ready for the wok. They were cutting up breakfast on an old breadboard. All this equipment had been found for them out of stock. An American Army tent, also Barney's property, had been pitched alongside the table.

"They've just started the morning shift," explained Don. "There were some young bucks spent the night in the tent and now grandad and nana have come over for a few hours. They're not bad people, you know. I don't think Barney's going to get a dagger between the ribs after all."

"Gawd! They're as weak as piss," said Freddy in an aggrieved tone. "Fu Manchu should be here to smarten them up a bit. If he'd been in charge Barney would be tied down right now dying the death of a thousand cuts, or chained to the wall in an underground room with water pouring in and no escape from being drowned."

Tom and Chip shook hands with the elderly couple and clapped the old man on the back. They lined up their wives and children to shake hands also, which they did amidst much giggling. All except Rhett and Scarlett the two youngest who had to be carried away screaming.

"Well, Donny," said Tom, putting out his hand to his friend. "This is it. We said we were going to do it, and we're doing it. This is the big day, but we couldn't go without saying good-bye to the lot of you; and besides we have to collect some dough off Barney."

"And the best of British luck to you, mate," was Don's response as he gripped the outstretched hand.

The children had finished their fascinated inspection of the old people and now gathered round.

Kathleen, Barney, Freddy, and Maggie Spear appeared at the front of the building to see what was going on. Barney looked sceptically at the two trucks. "Aren't you going by train?"

"Can't afford it, Barn. If we pay fares and freight on this lot there won't be that much dough left over and we'll need it until we start earning something. It wouldn't be right to bot any money off old Jim; he's a battler like us and I don't think he's got anything to spare."

"Well, I reckon you two are the prize optimists of all time; you will be lucky to get as far as Seymour. I hope you've got some whips with you because those kids of yours are going to have to get out and push."

"No worries, Barn. Me and Chip went over the old buses last night and checked everything, and believe you me they haven't been going so well in years. Don't get your nickers in a knot, we'll fly there. We got our tents on board and we're going to doss down by the side of the road at night. I reckon we'll save a bit of dough like that on the way up. Every cracker we can save is going to come in useful."

Barney was sceptical on hearing this. He shook his head. "Well, I don't know. I reckon you'd be lucky to make Seymour. In fact I think I'll put my money on Pretty Sally; if that doesn't stop you, with all the luck in the world you might get as far as Albury, but I bet you any money you like you'll never get over those hills, even as far as Yass."

"Ah, we're not going through Yass." was Chip Dowd's contribution. "Once we're past Albury we'll get off the Hume Highway. I think we'll go the back way and miss Sydney altogether."

"I'll say you're not going through Yass! It's a hot day today and the north wind isn't helping. You'll be lucky to go through anywhere with those clapped out old bombs. Keep those bloody kids out of there!" he shouted.

The children, bored with the talk of their elders, had started to swarm into Barney's premises and he darted away to herd them out on to the footpath once more.

"I dunno," said Don, comfortingly. "You blokes are hard to stop. I reckon you'll get through one way or another." He glanced across at the tangle of ropes holding down the bulky, awkward loads on the trucks. "That's a daggy collection of ropes you've got there; it looks as if your mothers were frightened by a spider."

Barney came out roaring, with the children huddled in front of him as Kathleen was kissing the men and their wives good-bye. He glared at the children and they stood well away from the entrance to his lair in wary respect.

The two men approached Barney. "Well, Barn! How about opening your purse and giving the moths a bit of air. We got eight and half hours each at ten bob owing to us, so if you can fix us up now it'll be a great help; and while you're at it how about stretching a point and giving us an advance on the furniture we put in for auction?"

"What you've earned you can have right now," said Barney dourly, "but no advances. When we sell your goods we'll post the money up to Queensland; less commission of course."

Kathleen was aghast at such meanness. "Dad, why do you carry on like this? that furniture of theirs is going to bring £30 at least, I have just been looking it over. We can give them that much easily, and it's not charity, it's business."

"Bloody fine business, I must say. What if the stuff turns out to have borer, or something like that? I don't want to be up shit creek in a barbed wire canoe! And what about the commission? You're too busy handing out my money to all and sundry to bother about a little, minor item like profit."

"They're not all and sundry, Dad. They're our friends and they need the money. Anyone would think it was going to break us, the way you carry on. I'll just go in and get their wages, and the advance."

Barney threw his hands up in disgust.

Tom stepped in as a peacemaker. "Don't worry, Kath. It's not that important, I reckon we'll make it on what we've got. But that's not much I can tell you, because it's amazing the way the money goes. Ken Wilkie gave us £25 the other day, final payment on the house, and most of it has gone in bills and such, that we had to settle up before we left. Mainly doctors' and dentists' bills. Young Marlene had to have her teeth straightened, and Clark fell off the wood-shed and broke his wrist, and you know how these fellers are; they charge like wounded bulls."

"I'm going to get that money right now," Kathleen stated firmly and disappeared into the office.

Barney was disgusted. "Anyone'd think we're running a game here instead of an auction room. If this sort of thing keeps up I'll go broke; I'll have to ask you two for a job on the pineapple farm. Anyway, how did you go with the fence? Did you fix it up alright?"

"Beautiful, Barney. The stork looks a treat and we fixed up the fence, even gave it a lick over with camouflage paint. The old lady was really rapt in the paint job; I think she must be a bit short-sighted. Anyway, we told her her benefactor was Mr Barney O'Connell, and she's coming round to thank you personally. If you've got two or three hours to spare she'll do it, too.

"Thanks for nothing! I don't know why, but I seem to attract all the nut-cases around. Why do they want to talk to me? Anyway, there'll be one thing in my favour, you blokes will be out of my hair."

"It'll be too peaceful, Barn. You won't know what to do with yourself. But there is one thing we would like to see before we leave. Why don't you and Don kiss and make up. You two would go well together if only you'd learn to grow up."

Don and Barney looked at one another warily. "It's up to him," said Barney. "He was the one that told me what I could do with the job. If he wants to stay, in future he'll have to learn to do what he's told and not set up booby traps on the footpath."

"You had better not hold your breath if you're waiting for me to apologise," retorted Don defiantly. "You're the one that started all this."

"I should have had more common sense," said Barney, "than to try and do the right thing by you. You're unreasonable, you're hard to get along with, and you're rude to the customers. If you can't treat your customers right you're better off out of this sort of business altogether."

His auditors looked at one another in astonishment at hearing accusations from such an unexpected quarter.

While they talked Kathleen went to the office and came out with the money and a statement she had prepared showing how much was owed to the two men. She tried to give it to Barney for him to study, but he was gloomy at the failure of his talk with Don and waved the paper away. He did not learn until later that Kathleen had advanced the two men £40 instead of £30 against the sale of their furniture.

The policeman appeared again, rode up again on his bike and rested the left hand pedal on the bluestone kerb to hold the machine upright.

"It's going to be a bit dull up in Queensland," remarked Tom Neerim. "I reckon the pineapples aren't going to be a patch on this place for excitement. But what are you going to do when all the court cases start coming on? I reckon you're going to be a busy lad."

The policeman looked alertly from one to another at the mention of court cases.

Barney shrugged. "We'll worry about that when the time comes. He addressed the policeman, "Do you want to see me, Shaun?"

"Yes I do, Barney. There are some things round here that need clearing up."

"O.K. Hang on a minute, I want to have a word with these blokes in private and then I'll be right with you." He gestured. "Come down to the back of the room. I got something I want to say and it's only for you two. Kath!" he bellowed, "keep an eye on those kids. I don't want them in here."

Kathleen took the wives and the children over the road to the lolly shop nearby and bought the children a penny ice-cream each. Barney led the men to the back of his establishment leaving Don and Freddy standing with the policeman.

"What are they doing here?" asked the policeman, pointing to the aged Chinese man and his wife who were sitting quietly trying to understand what was going on around them.

Don shrugged. "They're for sale, I think. Only Barney hasn't decided what price to put on them. You buy the pair, Shaun. They'd go well in your garden."

The constable was irritated. "All I get round here are smart answers and evasions. It's about time I got a few proper replies. There's a hell of a lot going on round here that I don't know about; and if Barney's harbouring illegal Chinese immigrants he's in deep trouble."

"Well, he hasn't been out of trouble in a long time. I suppose he'll take this in his stride too. Anyway, it's his problem, you'll have to sort it out with him. I'm leaving next week."

While the constable was waiting to interview him, Barney was talking to the two contractors.

The hot wind was howling again and shaking the whole building. A sheet of iron was flapping and clattering at the nails that were gradually working loose.

They were all sweating in the heat and humidity but tried to ignore it.

Barney said, "The money you got off me for wages, that was business, the advance you got from Kath wasn't business but I'll probably get out of it so we'll let it pass. Now you two have known me long enough to know that if I owe anyone any money I give it to them and if I don't I won't. What's yours is mine, and what's mine's me own, and I stick to it."

The two men waited to see what this was leading to. "So if a thing's not mine," he said, "I want to get rid of it. Having got this far, I'm telling you that something I've got here is not mine and I'm giving it to you blokes."

Barney reached into his hip-pocket and produced a small linen bag

"What's that?"

"It's the bag of money Don found in the old duchess chest. Now I've been nutting this out since it was found, and one thing I'm sure of, it's not mine. I think Teddy Sturgess put it there, if so I had to decide who was going to get it after him."

"Well, that'd be the Public Solicitor, or whatever his name is, wouldn't you think?"

"The Public Solicitor!" Barney expressed his opinion of the Public Solicitor in a few coarse phrases. "The stinking government!" said Barney, with unspeakable contempt. "I would sooner hand it over to Tommy Cave than a bunch of fat-gut civil servants that are helping to run this country into the bone-yard. No, that lawyer man, what's his name? Wilkie! He said you could have anything in the house providing you took it away. Now as far as I'm concerned, the government has had its turn; if it couldn't find the money before it gave all that stuff away it can bloody-well do without."

"Crikey, Barn, do you mean - ?"

"Just shut up and listen for a minute. I owned that chest once and it may or may not have had the money in it then. I remember the guy that sold it to me. His wife blew through on him with another bloke and he sold up everything and went over to the West. He seemed pretty shift and I've wondered since if the police were after him. It may or may not have been his money, but I sold the chest to Teddy Sturgess, so whatever was in it became his property. Now the government got his estate somehow and they gave everything in the house to you, including the duchess chest. I tried to sell that chest to Tommy Cave, on your behalf. If he had bought the chest fair and square the money would have been his, but he didn't, he knocked it back, so the chest was still yours when we found the money. It's yours; here, take it and go to buggery." He thrust the bag into Tom Neerim's hands.

"Jingo! This is real decent of you, Barney; but are you sure you're doing the right thing? Don't you think you'd better see a solicitor before you go giving it away?"

"What, and let those vultures get first cut at it? No fear, I'm all the solicitor I need. Like I said, I know it's not mine and I think it's yours. The way I look at it, you two haven't got much between the ears but you're battlers, like me, and you're honest; which is more than can be said for a lot of people I've met. Well, I don't know anyone else that has a share in this bag of money, there's a hundred and eighty quid in it, and I would sooner you had it than anyone else."

"Gee, Barney, you're blood's worth bottling; this bit of cash is going to make all the difference to us, honestly we don't know how to thank you!"

"Well, don't bother, just clear off, go on, you're making the place look untidy, you're worse than the chows!" He marched out to the front ignoring their incredulous thanks. Kathleen met him at the front door with the statement and once more tried to induce him to check it. He ignored her, except to point with his thumb over his shoulder at the two men who were following. He turned away into the auction room and vigorously started stacking furniture ready for the following auction sale.

Kathleen came in about a minute later and kissed him on the cheek, at which he grunted and opined that it was about time the staff settled down and started to do some work instead of carrying on like a bunch of nit-wits.

"They're going now, Dad," she said. "Why don't you come out and wave them good-bye; we may never see them again and it would be terrible if they went and you didn't even wave good-bye."

"Yair, terrible's the word for it! but it will be even more terrible if we do see them again."

"Oh, stop complaining and come!"

With an ill-grace he put down some blackwood dining chairs he was carrying and walked out to the footpath. The policeman, whom he had forgotten, was looking at the two trucks as though not sure whether he should change his mind and declare them unroadworthy after all.

The Dodge utility and the International tip-truck were packed with humans and goods again as they prepared to move off. The younger children were sitting between their parents in the cabins and noisily resentful of the luck of the two older ones who had been found reasonably safe and comfortable positions on the load outside. There was nowhere else to put them, and they would soon learn what it meant to travel two thousand miles like this in all weathers and over all kinds of roads.

They were just about to pull away from the kerb when Tom Neerim leapt out of the cabin of the tip truck and ran over towards them.

"Kath," he said urgently. "For God's sake write and tell us what happens. We won't be able to concentrate on growing pineapples if we don't find out what happens next." He counted

off on his fingers, "Barney's going to have a summons out against him from the Sturgess Estate. Two from Tommy Cave, one on account of the picture. The place is going to be pulled down. He's going to get a bill from the council for road repairs. They can't find the title deeds for this place. The best storeman he could ever get is leaving on Friday, and he's being blockaded by the Chinese. We'll go mad if we don't hear any more episodes of this story."

"I'll write," Kathleen promised. "We have your address put away safely, and I'll write and let you know how everything turns out."

"OK, love. Tata! Sorry we couldn't hang around for the wedding, but you know how it is." He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and dashed back across to his waiting vehicle.

"Hooroo, Doug, Kath, Barney, Freddy" the voyagers shouted, "see you when you come to Queensland. Don't forget to drop in on us. If you get some pineapples in the mail you'll know where they came from."

While everyone was shouting their good-byes, except for Barney, who remained moodily silent, the two vehicles wrenched themselves free of the kerb and started to clatter off against the heavy, hot north wind which scraped up dust from the road and flung it at them.

While they were still in sight, before disappearing round the curve in the road, the policeman stiffened and grasped Don by the arm. He pointed, "That's an old cut down Chev. with wooden spoke wheels."

"It's a Dodge."

"Well, whatever. I'll bet any money you like that's the vehicle that was mixed up in the incident in Mayblossom Street. What's the name of the driver?"

"Chip Dowd."

"Where does he live? What's his address?"

"Queensland."

"That's not an address! That's a state. I want his address!"

Don shrugged. "That's all I know. Don't ask me anything about it. Anyway why don't you get the bloke himself. If you hop on your bike now I reckon you'll catch them up about St. Kilda Junction."

The constable looked at his bicycle but decided not to take Don's advice of going in pursuit of the suspect. He would be heading into a blinding hot gale." Don, tell me what's going on around here."

"I don't know, Shaun, I'm leaving Friday, and ever since I started I haven't known what's been going on around here. You go and ask Barney."

"Don't you worry, I will." He turned to look for Barney.

The trucks disappeared. The rattle and vibration of their progress emphasised by an occasional back fire was no longer audible. The road had regained its usual aspect as the two hurrying streams of traffic passed one another in opposite directions, while the north-bound stream steadily overtook and passed the voyagers' two rickety old vehicles.

"If it's not too much to ask," hectored Barney, who had gripped the man in blue by the upper arm as though keeping him for reference while he addressed his helpers. "What about someone besides me doing a bit of work in the place. We've still got a business to run, believe it or not, and we've got an auction sale coming up. Come on Don, stop standing around, like a bottle of stale milk, and let's do something."

"Get Freddy. I have to take the blitz and do four calls this morning."

It was part of Don's duties to go to houses and value second-hand furniture for sale. He would buy it for cash, where possible; otherwise he would try and persuade the owner to let him take it back to Barney's premises for sale by auction.

Don looked at some scraps of paper in his hand. "There's a bedroom suite in Brighton, some odd junk at a place in Highett, and two deceased estates in Moorabbin and Sandringham. If I see any works of art while I'm out I'll snap them up for you."

"You be careful," cautioned Barney. "Just because you had one lucky buy you think you luck will just keep rolling along; what you don't know is that something like that happens only once in about a million years. Don't keep on expecting to win Tatts every week. Here!" He gave Don some money to pay for any purchases.

"Just buy what you know about, if anything, and leave the rest alone. Now get on with it and come back as soon as you can; we've got a big day in front of us."

"And don't forget to fill in the second-hand dealer's book, too!" said his friend the constable. "You and Barney are giving me enough head-aches as it is. I don't want any more."

Chapter – 20

As soon as Don had gone to prepare the truck the policeman began his inquiries. He consulted some notes in his book.

"This tent," he said, indicating the American army tent that was pitched to one side of the door in the space between the front of the building and the footpath. "I've examined the interior and have discovered evidence of occupation. It contains four stretchers and I have reason to believe, from information laid at the station, that it is occupied by certain Chinese nationals who are illegal immigrants in this country. I therefore have to ask you, what answer do you make to this statement?"

"The blokes from the market-garden take it in turns to sleep here of a night, that's all. If you want to see them they're over looking after the cabbages right now, but I think they were all here before the war. It would surprise me if you could prove that they were illegal immigrants. I reckon Charley, and Joe, and some of those others were here before Kath was born."

"Well, what are they doing sleeping here? And these two on the garden swing, cooking breakfast, or whatever it is." He wrinkled his nose at the odours proceeding from the wok. "Don't tell me you're running a common boarding house here? Because if you are you're right up against the law."

"Well, I'm not feeding them, or lodging them. I didn't ask them to come here. All I want is for them to go away. In fact, I wish you would all go away and let me get on with running the business."

"If you are offering shelter and food, that's lodging them; but if they're trespassers tell me and I'll run them off for you."

"They're not trespassers," stated Kathleen, who had been listening. "They're friends. We invited them to stay here."

Both men turned and looked at her in disgust. Shaun, the policeman, had almost discovered a clear line of action, but now Kathleen had spoiled it for him. He was not a man who liked being uncertain of his duty. He said, "Barney owns the place, I guess, and he's the one to say whether they're trespassers or guests."

"They're trespassing!"

"They're guests!"

"Look; if they're lodgers you're gone because this is not a boarding house, you haven't got the facilities for lodgers, you haven't got anything; and in any case you can't put lodgers in a tent. If they're trespassers I can run them off, and you can prosecute if you want to. If they're non-paying guests, well I dunno. I'll have to go back to the station and ask the Sergeant about that."

"Alright," said Barney. "I'll sort it out, it's no good you going to the market-garden and trying to find out anything. As soon as they catch sight of the uniform they will forget all the English they've ever learned. You won't get anything out of them."

Shaun acknowledged the point. "O.K., I'll leave it to you; but it has to be fixed up, Barney; and don't be too long about it. I reckon you'll have a visit from the Health Inspector over this. If you and Kath want to keep a bunch of Chinese on the premises you will have to install lavatories and a bathroom, and God knows what before he'll be satisfied."

While Barney talked to the policeman Don checked the blitz-buggy to make sure it had rope and packing on board, Mr Wilson looked out of the front of his premises and called Don over.

"Don! come here," he said, "I want to show you something." Don went over to his forge. "I was watchin' and seen your mates go off to Queensland this morning. Those trucks they were driving looked pretty crook, I reckon they might strike a bit of trouble on the way."

"Could be, but Barney gave them a boost; they got that bag of money out of him without even trying. He had it worked out that it was their dough, so he just handed it over."

"Go on! Yer don't say! Well, that's better than a poke in the eye with a burnt stick, any day, ain't it? I've known Barney for three years now, and people come to me and say this and that about him but he has always treated me like a gentleman -- always! Well maybe not always, but he did shift the lino and had the wall made new. So he looked after your mates, too. There's many a man would've stuck to that bag of money."

"Yair, when you come to look at it, I suppose there are worse blokes around."

The blacksmith looked thoughtfully at the bed of coke glowing dull red in the forge. "It's a world of change, Don. Your mates have gone off to Queensland, you're leaving Friday, and this is my last day at the forge. I'm finishing up tomorrow morning. I've talked it over with Barney, and I'll just take off the apron for the last time and walk straight out and not come back."

"Nah!" he indicated the tools scattered about the shed. "Barney can have all this, no one wants a black-smith's business now, let alone his tools. If he can sell any of it, good luck to him I say. I'm just taking me old hammer and tongs as a memento, the rest he can throw away as far as I'm concerned. Here, have a look at this." With his tongs he felt around in the murky looking water of the trough where the red hot steel was cooled after being worked on the anvil. "I suppose you've heard me belting away with the hammer for the last day or two; well, I've been making something."

He brought a large, flat, curiously shaped steel object out of the trough and handed it dripping to Don. Don turned it over once or twice before he realised that it was the capital letter 'U' gracefully formed in Old English script. There were some more letters set in order on the dirt floor and covered by a chaff bag. Mr Wilson lifted the bag and showed that he had partly completed a sign in wrought iron that spelled out 'BARNEYS A -----'

"It's coming on nicely," said the blacksmith, "A sort of going away present. I'll finish off the rest of the letters tonight when I come back after tea; then all I have to do is weld bars on the back to hold them in place and the job's done. I'll hand it over to Barney before I go. If he paints them white, they should stand out well against all that olive green paint he's slapped over

everything. Good and big, aren't they!" he remarked, standing back with his head on one side to admire the letters. "If Barney keeps them painted and sticks them up on the front of the building, no one could miss them, and they'll last forever."

After admiring the partly completed sign, Don went off to do his work and the blacksmith put the letters to one side. A few of his old market-gardener clients had promised to turn up with their remaining horses to have them shod for the last time, and then they were to take him down to the hotel for a farewell drink.

Chapter – 21

By midday the north wind had strengthened. It was a hot wind and later in the season it would be a dangerous wind carrying the threat of bush-fire throughout Victoria. For the present it made life uncomfortable for everyone in its path until at last it left the land and was tempered by the coolness of the ocean.

It was days like this that tested vehicles going up the hill called Pretty Sally, part of the Great Dividing Range. It was not particularly steep but represented a long, slow haul to the top. A few trucks and cars foundered before reaching the top. The petrol in the carburettor or vacuum tank would evaporate, or the strain would simply be too much for the machines that attempted the climb.

Stopped by the side of the highway on this difficult slope was one of these. A broken down, worn out, overladen, Dodge utility that could go no further and was blowing off clouds of white steam through its cracked radiator.

The old utility had climbed with diminishing energy two thirds of the way to the summit of Pretty Sally and had there stopped, apparently never to go again. Built into the radiator cap was a temperature gauge that measured the heat of water in the radiator. A metal arrow and temperature scale shielded by glass showed the rise and fall of temperature within. The arrow of this thermometer was pointing to the red end of the scale and jammed hard against the pin marked with a red, 'H'.

Parked close in front of the utility was an equally shabby vehicle, a tip-truck, fortunately still mobile, loaded high with people and household goods.

The two men driving had, after a time, exhausted their not inconsiderable vocabulary in abusing the Dodge, but it had no effect.

The starter motor would no longer operate, and after turning everyone out of the cabin in order to locate the starting handle under the front seat, they discovered the engine had seized up and it was impossible to turn it over by hand.

They decided after some bitter discussion that the trouble was either a cracked cylinder head or block, or both, a fault far beyond any hope of a road side repair.

"Come on, Chip" said Tom, at last, "if everyone gets out and pushes we can swing her round and point the nose down the hill, then I can let her coast as far as possible. We won't try and start her in gear, it would just be a waste of time. I'll roll it as far as I can, then we'll use one of the ropes to haul it back to Wallan."

"The garage bloke there won't have no cylinder heads."

"I'll bet he won't, but it's somewhere to leave the families because we'll have to go back as far as Sydney Road and try the wreckers there, see how we get on."

Chip shrugged, but there was nothing else to be done. Tom let the Dodge roll backwards down the hill in a wide arc so it ended up on the grass verge on the other side of the road, almost

facing downhill. With another push from all hands he was able to straighten it. He held it in gear while everyone scrambled aboard. As soon as the utility was rolling away downhill, Chip started the tip-truck to turn and follow. Soon distant Queensland was even further behind them as they trundled noisily back towards Melbourne.

The two vehicles had different braking capabilities; there was no way of bringing the tip-truck to a gentle halt, because, no matter how cautiously the driver applied the foot-pedal, the brakes would suddenly bind locking the rear wheels. The brakes were either right off or hard on. In the hands of a driver not used to these peculiarities, the truck was a public danger. In fact, it was, no matter who drove it.

The brakes on the utility, such as they were, worked differently. The men had modified and improved them as far as possible. When the driver stamped hard on the foot-pedal the vehicle would begin to lose momentum, and stop, depending on the state of the road, slope, wind resistance, speed, load, and so on. When a stop was necessary it was usually easier to slip into low gear and use the clutch or go for the hand-brake, which had a more positive effect than the foot-pedal. The radiator, temperature gauge, and head lights of the utility were smashed repeatedly against the back of the truck during their epic return journey.

The strongest rope they possessed was used as a tow-rope, but had proved unequal to the task. It broke a number of times on the way and each time was retied, amidst clouds of profanity. The rope grew shorter with each mishap. In the end Tom estimated it had about two more breaks in it before becoming completely useless.

Hauled along as it was by the fraying cord attaching it to the rear of the tip-truck, and subject to these mechanical difficulties, the utility struggled like a hooked fish.

It would keep going when the truck stopped and smash into its rear, or else the tip-truck, which also was having clutch difficulties, would jerk off suddenly and the tow-rope would break. It seemed to the drivers and passengers that this sequence was repeated endlessly through the long afternoon's journey. There was no hope of getting the crippled vehicle to Queensland and instead they were trailing back to Barney's Auction for help and comfort.

The only luck they had on the way was a sudden change of temperature. The north wind had been overcome by a cool wind from the south which was now sweeping the heat back where it came from. Perhaps the Dodge could have got to the top of Pretty Sally if the weather had been kinder.

Their worst moment was on Princes Bridge after they passed through the Central Business District. The tow-rope broke as usual followed by a particularly shattering crash against the back of the truck. It was then that a child, and a number of domestic items, fell off the utility to block the mass of south-bound traffic, and trams, pouring down Swanston Street.

This happened under the eyes of several disapproving policemen.

A young constable came across, incredulous, after the universal manner of policemen, to find his orderly traffic interrupted by these decaying hulks of machinery which should never have been permitted on the roads in the first place.

"A man oughter book you on the spot," he said, pulling out his notebook. "They're unroadworthy. What do you mean trying to drive these old bumpers through the middle of the city in peak hour? This is gunna cost you."

Marie Neerim had had enough. For hours she had endured being jolted over potholes with the never ending need for vigilance to stop her children being flung against dashboard or windscreen when they crashed to a halt. Heat and exhaustion had shredded her patience and now this boy in uniform was threatening her husband. She got out of the cramped cabin.

"You say one more word," she said, "one more word and we'll walk away and leave these trucks here."

"You're not leaving those old chaff cutters on my bridge. Look at that!" Traffic was banking up all the way along Swanston Street, as far as they could see into the distance. Only one file of cars was able to crawl slowly past the marooned trucks. "If you give me any cheek I'll take you both in."

"They're yours," retorted Marie decisively, indicating the two decrepit vehicles. If you want to talk to us about them we'll be in Queensland. Get your suitcases everyone; we'll go over to the station and catch a train." She indicated to her husband and Chip they should get some essential gear off the trucks.

The policeman considered this statement and put away his book. "Alright, buzz off. I don't care where you go as long as you get away from here. If I come across you lot in Swanston Street again I'll book you for sure." He stood at the back of the Dodge and with exaggerated arm movements beckoned the traffic to hurry past.

"Come on," said Chip comfortingly as everyone climbed back on or into the trucks. "High Street Hill is our only worry. Once we're over that it'll be a breeze - no probs."

A little encouraged by this Tom retied the tow rope and they continued their weary journey.

Some second-hand furniture consigned to auction had been heaped on the footpath, and Barney and Freddy were carrying it inside when a melancholy little procession of two aged trucks appeared and crept up to the front of the auction room.

Barney was carrying a leatherette covered lounge chair upside down on his head when he saw the two vehicles. He put the arm-chair down and seated himself in it while folding his arms. He surveyed the little expedition grimly as it rolled to a stop.

Two cramped families descended and stood in a semi-circle in front of Barney's chair looking at him. He surveyed them back.

The old Chinese couple were still occupying their garden swing as they looked on and waited for the inscrutable ways of the westerners to be explained to them.

"How are you going, Barney?" said Tom.

"Mind your own bloody business; how far did you get?"

"We conked out about half way up Pretty Sally," was Tom's reply. "Were not going to make it, Barney. The old Dodge is stonkered, we've cracked the head and the engine seized up."

Barney nodded contemptuously; he had been justified again. "I told you this morning what was going to happen, but you wouldn't listen. You would have been damned lucky to get over Pretty Sally, it would have been a miracle to reach the border, and you would have needed the hand of God pushing to get you past Wagga and that's only the first few hundred miles."

The men nodded in rueful agreement of this assessment of their chances. Tom said, "Yair, well I guess you're right, but you can see we're really in the poo now. We haven't got anywhere to stay the night, we're a hell of a long way from where we want to be, and we've got no way of getting there."

"What about the money I gave you? Anyone with a pocket-full of money like that hasn't got anything to grizzle about. You can get yourselves anywhere in Australia with that kind of dough. Don't come to me with your troubles. I've got enough of me own."

"Now you come to mention it, Barney, that's another thing we wanted to talk to you about. Did you have a good look at that money before you gave it to us?"

"Look at it? No, why should I? It wasn't mine. All I did was count it, there were nine fifty quid notes, and then put them back in the bag. Why, is there something wrong?"

"You could say so, Barn.; all the notes are dud; it's a bag full of brummy money."

Barney was astounded and delighted at this news. "You mean to say, it's not worth a cracker? Tommy Cave nearly had a baby over a collection of worthless paper?" The men nodded. "How'd you find out?"

"Well, we were going to leave the Dodge at Wallan, but then we decided to tow it back to Sydney Road in case we could get a new head and change it over straight away. It was about lunch time, and the kids were getting hungry so we stopped at a bank to cash one of your twenty quid notes. I peeled one off the roll and gave it to the teller and asked him to break it down into singles. This bloke seemed to know something about money. He snapped it with his fingers, then he put it up near his nose and peered at it with his glasses, then without them; he sniffed it; he did everything but taste the bloody thing. Then he went off to the manager's office and we could hear them muttering away to one another. It was getting a bit dicky in there because the staff was starting to stand up on chairs to look at us over the tops of the partitions. The other customers were looking at us sideways too, and it was dead quiet, and do you know what? He was saying something about a couple of shifty looking crooks in the bank trying to palm off a dud twenty quid note."

"What happened then?"

"We did what we always do in the face of danger; we took off, we scarpered."

"You know what you've done now, don't you?" said Barney, who was delighted at the hearing of these events. "You've got the police after you; all the cops in Melbourne will be out looking for the counterfeiting gang. How you busted through road blocks I'll never know. Maybe the cops just couldn't believe that the gang made its getaway in a tip-truck towing an old utility and loaded down with forty kids. I've got to hand it to you blokes, it was the perfect front for the job. It's no use though, they're bound to catch you in the end. I can just see you lot up at Russell Street in the identity parade; I think I'll come in just for the laughs."

"That may not be as silly as it sounds, Barney, Chip grabbed the twenty quid note on the way out but it was the wrong one; it's different to the others."

Barney burst out laughing at the despondent group in front of him. "I don't like to say it, but I'm going to miss you lot when you go. Still, our loss is the pineapple's gain. That is when you get there, of course; I reckon ten years apiece should be just about right for this afternoon's little episode."

"Alright, Barney," said Tom sourly, "you've had your pick at us, and I suppose we deserve it; but we're in dead trouble and we're asking you for help. You see, we've got to get out of Melbourne. Apart from any trouble with the bulls, it's costing us money for meals and accommodation, and with the tribe we've got, the dough will run out in no time. It'll take us months to save up another roll."

"We can't get our houses back," said Marie, "they'll have been let again by now, you know what it's like these days. If we can get to Queensland at least we'll have a roof over everyone's head and the boys will be able to get on with the job."

"Alright, what do you want me to do about it?"

"We're asking you to help us, please!"

"O.K.," said Barney decisively, "I'll help you if you do what you're told and don't argue. First go and see George, ask him if it's alright to dump your stuff in a corner of the forge. I don't

think he'll mind because it's closing down for good. If he says it's OK get them to unload those two antiques you call trucks

You can take them to The Bentleigh Car Wrecker, and sell them to him. He'll be there alright, because he lives on the premises. It doesn't matter what he offers, don't argue, just take it; anything you get for those two mechanical disasters will be a profit."

Kathleen had come out to listen to the story, greet the two wives and help soothe the children who had become fractious after their long, tiring journey.

"If Mr Wilson doesn't mind," she said, "We'll get the beds and mattresses off the truck and set you up for the night in the forge. There's tons of room in there, it's the same size as the other two rooms."

"That's up to George," said Barney. "I don't suppose there's much they can break in a blacksmith's shop, but if I find any of those kids in our section I'll boot them out so fast they'll think all their birthdays have come at once."

"Take them over to the park for a while," suggested Kathleen, diplomatically. "They can feed the swans; that will be nice for them."

"It would be even better," interposed Barney, "If you fed them to the swans; that should make everyone happy."

"The tent's here too," was Kathleen's suggestion, "Maybe we can ask the Chinese not to sleep in it tonight. I'm sure they wouldn't mind, just for one night."

"Yes," said Barney, "That'd be bloody generous of them, I must say. You gotta be big hearted not to sleep in a man's tent without an invitation, and use his beds and mattresses; and all this tea and stuff you're giving them. I just hope the money's not coming out of the till."

Kathleen ignored this question. "We'll have to wait until Charley and Joe come over tonight. I'm sure they won't mind if we ask them nicely."

"Look, Kath, I tell you I'm jack of this lot. I don't go over there and doss down among the vegies, and I don't expect them to sleep over here. There's no argument about it - they'll just have to go."

"You need glasses!" retorted Kathleen, making a sudden, flank attack. "I've been telling you for months you shouldn't be screwing up your eyes when you read anything. If you'd had glasses you would have known the money was counterfeit. I'll ring up tomorrow and make an appointment with the optician for you."

"I don't need glasses, it's just the lighting's crook at home. I'll have to get new globes; and don't you ring up anyone, do you hear? I won't have it."

He turned and stalked away.

The blacksmith had come back after the pub closed and made no difficulty about the families passing the night in his forge. He was rather pleased at the thought of finding company there when he came back after tea. It would be less lonely while working on the sign he was making for Barney. He moved out two horses that had been freshly shod and tethered them outside to wait for their owners. He helped rake the straw out of the stalls and took it tidily out through the back door to leave until morning.

When the stalls were cleaned out, and the mothers of the children were satisfied the place was not infested with fleas, they moved in their own household goods unloaded from the trucks.

Don came in, heard the tale of the day's adventure and, helped by Mr Wilson, set up beds and stretchers that had been piled on the truck. They spread tarpaulins underfoot to keep down the dust.

"It could be worse," said Mr Wilson, looking over their work. "You're lucky it's not winter, but the outside temperature is about right now, after the hot day. It's a draughty old joint in here in the cold weather, but you'll be warm tonight, no worries. I'll be back after tea, like I told them, and I'm going to finish off that name for Barney. It won't do the kids any harm, missus, if they sit up and watch me. It will be an education really, because they might never see a dinky-di blacksmith in their lives again, not a working one anyway. We're a dying breed, and I'm one of the last. So you let them watch and see how hand-crafted work was done for thousands of years, before the machines took over. When I'm finished you can keep the fire going all night, if you like. There are some bags of coke in the corner, and all I want is half a bag left over in the morning to finish up with. You can use the forge to cook your tea with, if you like. A bit of steak and few snags cooked on a hot plate, they go down real well."

Before the two men left to sell their trucks, Barney recovered the bag of counterfeit money. When examined it was discovered that every note was bogus, except for the one that Chip Dowd had picked up on his way out of the bank.

Barney took charge of this note too, intending to post it back to the bank with an anonymous letter signed - 'Conscience stricken', or some such thing.

After the men departed on their way to Bentleigh, Barney had his best moment of the day when Tommy Cave arrived like an avenging angel armed, not with the rod of death, but a summons. He approached. "Is your name Barney Kevin O'Connell?" he demanded to know, without preliminary.

Barney looked at him. "You've known me for three years, Tommy; if you haven't found out my name by now you'll never know it."

"Is that your full and correct name?" the little dealer wanted to know.

"Of course it is, you silly looking Arab, It always has been, you know that."

"Well, I've got something for you." He handed Barney the summons. "This is to show cause why you shouldn't hand over the bag of money that belongs to me."

Barney examined the document cheerfully and roared for Don and Kathleen who were still in the smithy, helping set up the families for the night. When they came out he showed them the summons. They smiled benignly at Mr Cave but said nothing.

"I've brought you out as witnesses," it was explained to them, "Because I've decided that if anyone deserves what is in this bag it's me old mate, Tommy, here." Barney put his arm round the little man's shoulders. "I've been tortured by conscience, Tommy, ever since I deprived you of your property, so I won't rest easy until you get what you deserve, and you certainly deserve what I've got here. Now, you two witness that I'm handing it over to Tommy. Take it straight up to the bank first thing tomorrow, lad, and see if you can get a big smile out of the bank manager when he sees what you've got in the bag for him."

Cave was astonished, and clutched the bag. "I never thought you would come to your senses so quickly, Barney, he said, with the bag safely in his hands. He had a sudden doubt when he saw the expressions of the people in front of him. "It's all here, isn't it? You haven't taken any out?"

"There is one note missing, Tommy. But don't you worry your little head about it; as soon as I get another note of equal value I'll give it to you. While we're talking about summonses, old pal, have you got another one for me. You said you were going to sue me over that painting."

"Well, no; as a matter of fact I'm not," said the little man, shying away a bit from the question. "As far as I'm concerned, we can let bygones be bygones. I'm not going to sue you over that, and I'll take that other summons back with me too; we won't need that anymore." He

paused, then the relief he felt at getting his hands on the money overcame his reticence. "I don't mind telling you, Barney, that was a shemozzle from the start. The woman that told me to buy the picture is a nut case. She has been coming into my shop every day for the last week and talks for about two hours non-stop, and I can't get rid of her! The customers won't come into the shop because she latches on to them and punishes their ears, and they can't get away either. She told me to buy this picture because it was part of an estate, or something, then I found out she hasn't got a cracker. I don't mind telling you, I can't take much more."

His listeners were delighted to hear this story. Don asked, "Is she the old shiela with specs about as thick as the bottom of a lemonade bottle, and she comes from round the corner in Mayblossom Street?"

"That's the one, alright. You know her?"

"Do we ever! Mate, if she take a shine to you you're sitting pretty. You reckon Barney's got some dough; she could buy and sell Barney ten times over."

"Pull the other leg, will you, Don? It's got bells on it."

"No! no!" persisted Don. "You listen to what I'm saying. You look after that old tart and listen to every word she says. Because, know what, she was in here the other day and she told me she was looking for a young man to leave her money to when she dies. That could be you, Tommy. Why not? This business about her not having any money, that's a front. Her old man owned a mine at Majorca, near Ballarat, you know, and someone bought him out for a million quid. You stick with her, Tommy, she's filthy rich, or, at least, filthy. He tapped the little dealer on the chest. "Stay with her Tommy, she's worth it."

Cave went away presently, sceptical, yet wanting to believe the nonsense that Don had been trying to force on him. Having received his bag of money he was more receptive to ideas of unearned wealth.

Kathleen was a little sorry after he left. "We shouldn't have done it to him," she said. "He's going to get an awful shock when he tries to bank that money."

Barney chuckled. "The bank opens at ten, so he should be round here about half past. It depends whether or not the bank calls in the police to talk to him about his money; but he'll be around here some time tomorrow with his arse on fire. Things should be interesting for a while. Now don't start worrying about him. He deserves anything that happens to him, because he'd pinch the milk out of your tea if he got half a chance."

Later on, when Barney had finished putting away the furniture and gone home, the two men arrived back by bus. The car wrecker, had made a disparaging inspection of the two trucks and then, astonished by his own generosity bought them for £10 the two which was as good a price as they had expected. Now their hopes rested on Barney lending them enough money in the morning to buy train tickets to Queensland.

Kathleen promised to use her influence with Barney to get the money, then she and Don would pack all their household goods in some boxes they had out the back. Afterwards Don would load them on the blitz-buggy and take them to Spencer Street station for forwarding to Queensland.

Kathleen and Don had been invited to stay for an indoor sausage and chop grill in the old smithy. Freddy decided to stay too. Kathleen extended the invitation to the market-gardeners so, after some hesitation, they all came and crowded into the old building.

Kathleen knew where Barney hid the cash tin so she gave Marie and her friend some money so they could hurry over to the butcher before he closed, to buy some chops and sausages, and to the grocer to buy bread, butter, and tomato sauce

A flat steel plate, which usually leaned against the back wall, was lifted up and laid across the glowing heart of the furnace until it was hot enough to barbecue meat and sausages.

The market-gardeners soon realised the purpose of this strange ritual and sent away for some food of their own. Not only that, the messengers brought back brilliantly coloured lanterns and bundles of fire-crackers to help liven up the place and add to the illumination provided by the forge and the two or three hurricane lamps used by Mr Wilson from time to time.

The roman candles were a marvellous success placed in various carefully selected dark corners from where they poured out rich floods of coloured lights.

The children stood rockets in the necks of beer bottles outside. These were judiciously aimed and fired amidst great applause. The adults were careful which way these gorgeous missiles were pointed because, as Tom said virtuously, "We don't want to burn Barney's joint down on him; not after all he's done for us." They were set off in great flaring arcs over the road to the astonishment of passing drivers.

"Don is going to stay after all," reported Kathleen, very pleased with the thought. "After Dad gave you that money this morning Don went off to do his calls and when he got back he talked to Dad and said he was willing to stop if he was still wanted."

"Beauty, mate!" said the two men, and pounded Don on the back. "What did old Barn say to that?"

"He grunted a bit and said that if I wanted to stay I'd have to do what I was bloody-well told, and I said I'd do what I bloody-well liked and that seemed to satisfy him, so I'm still a member of the staff. When he gave you that money I'll bet my bottom dollar he didn't know it was a fake."

"I've told him and told him to get glasses," interposed Kathleen. "Have you noticed the way he squints when he's trying to read anything? But it doesn't matter. I'll ring the optician anyway, and make him go and have them tested."

"Yair, well maybe you're right, but I thought I might find a worse boss to work for than Barney."

About half past seven when they were clearing up, and cleaning everything as well as they could Mr Wilson came back. The men helped him to lift the hot steel plate off the fire and made a space for him round the anvil where he was shortly at work hammering red hot metal into cleanly formed Old English letters.

The big leather bellows that blew air through the furnace in the old days had never been disconnected and, attracted by this novelty, his guests took it in turns to pump up and down on the foot stirrup that operated the contraption.

"I inherited those bellows from me old Dad," he said. "Haven't used them in a long time, not since I got the electric blower. I won't turn it on tonight. If you want to work the bellows I'll get some free air from you lot instead."

The bellows were not as efficient as the electric blower but more picturesque, and each blast of air pumped through the burning coke made the fire leap and glow as though a great, fiery heart was beating on the hearth. Each time the flames roared higher up the chimney, carried on powerful blasts of hot air.

Finally the blacksmith finished the last of the letters. "That's the one we're looking for," he said triumphantly, filling the forge with steam as he quenched it in the water tub. "All we have to do now is fix them to the bars and the job's done."

By the time the letters were lined up and welded to the frame the heat in the old shed was intense as the children enthusiastically plied the bellows and squabbled to get a turn at working the foot stirrup.

Freddy showed them how torn up bits of newspaper would burst into flame on the furnace and disappear in a flash up the chimney. Mr Wilson was a reader of newspapers and there were plenty lying around; a whole succession of torn up scraps of newspaper disappeared flaring and whirling up the chimney.

As soon as the job was done, and the newly created sign laid on the floor to be admired, they became conscious of the intense heat and the long straight lines of yellow flames that were being sucked up the chimney by the draught.

"Eh, knock it off, you kids!" said the blacksmith, his face and hands were red with exertion and heat and the steady reflection of the flames which were eating ravenously at the last shovelful of fresh coke heaped in the centre of the fire.

The adults quickly pulled the children away from the bellows and fanned themselves with their hands.

"We'd better open the doors and let some cool air in."

"Be careful," Kathleen warned, ever practical, "They'll get their deaths of cold if they run around outside now. Let's open the windows and try and cool the place down gradually." They were startled by a tremendous banging on the corrugated iron double doors and the noise of kicking and shouting.

The blacksmith threw more bags over his handiwork in case it was Barney knocking at the door.

"Who's that," said Don. "I wonder what's going on." He went over to the door and pushed it open. "It's you, Shaun! What do you want? What's up?"

The policeman had hammered on the door. In spite of the night and gloom he seemed to stand out, illuminated, against the darkness. His huge shadow was cast on the wall of a warehouse on the other side of the road.

He said, "Don, have you got a permit to have a bonfire burning in the back yard, behind these buildings?"

"No, why?"

"Well, there's a bloody big one out there. I was doin' the rounds on me bike and saw flames behind your building shooting up higher than the roof line."

Don pushed both doors open and a rush of cool air came in.

"What the hell's going on here?" Asked Shaun. He was astonished at the sight of the people in the forge, and the faces of the oriental visitors, all startlingly clear and yellow in the light of the forge fire and in sharp contrast with the shadows behind them. To those looking out of the forge the whole area seemed strangely bright.

"It's alright Shaun," interposed Tom "Don't get 'em in a knot. George, here, has been doing some overtime; just cleaning up a last little job; and we've been helping him. Don't you worry, we'll tell you all about it in the morning."

"Why have you got a bonfire going in the back-yard? Are you mad? I was riding past and I could see the glow from the road. You'd better put it out before it gets out of hand."

They were all puzzled at this. "We didn't light no bonfire," said Chip Dowd. "We haven't been out the back!" He turned on the children. "It wasn't you bloody kids, was it?"

They all denied starting any fires in the back-yard.

Tom ran to the back door and wrenched it open. A gust of heat and flame poured in as he did so.

All the lank, dry grass in the back- yard, that had grown up around the bren-gun carrier wheels, was alight while the heap of straw that Mr Wilson had put outside was now blazing with the rest. Some four gallon drums of camouflage paint with clip-on lids were on fire against the back of the building. The heat had already burst the lids off two of them, and the boiling paint was welling over the sides and dissolving in sheets of red and yellow flame, and then into heavy gouts of stinking, black smoke.

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"Gor struth!" said Tom, falling back from the flames, "She's away! We must a' done it with some sparks from the forge." He slammed the door shut to keep the flames from licking inside and feeding on the dry wood-work.

It was time to get out! The corrugated iron back wall was starting to turn red, glowing from the fierce heat of the fire on the other side. Inside the dried out timber frame supporting the wall, charred and smoked.

The market gardeners quickly ushered the women and children outside, and helped by Mr Wilson began to drag out the family's possessions before the whole lot was consumed in the growing fire.

When Don threw open the other front doors of the building the sudden incursion of fresh air caused the fire to burst into a fury of destruction. Up to that moment the flames had been spreading along the back wall and nibbling away at any exposed timber. It had been reaching through the crevices and draught holes, licking slyly at the backs of the dressing tables and wardrobes that were on the platform facing the front.

With the aid of the draught from the door it increased in strength and malignancy, and from a mere toe-hold it suddenly gained a death-grip on the building and its stock.

The change and spare cash of the business was kept in a particular drawer of a particular wardrobe, which was still untouched, Don raced across and snatched the money out. It was in an old biscuit tin that served as a till and cash-box.

He came out clutching the tin and auction bell, which articles he handed to Kathleen before dashing back inside.

Don, and his helpers, started to pick up various items of stock and cart them outside, away from the flames. But this was futile and they soon had to desist because the job would have taken hours, and within minutes the rickety old shed became a frightening place to enter. The flames were spreading so fast through the wooden furniture and dry old building that nothing could be done.

Sheets of red-hot corrugated iron in the roof started to flap and bang against the nails that held them in place, driven by tremendous updraughts of flame and superheated air.

The blacksmith's shop burned steadily because there was little there to feed the fire, but Barney's sheds were spectacular; particularly the retail part. Even though they had not opened the door of that section to attempt a salvage the fire quickly began to range round the stock of lino and hardboard as well as the mass of other articles waiting to be sold.

The blacksmith had helped the Chinese carry the bedding and remnants of furniture and equipment intended for Queensland to a safe distance from the flames. He had done what he could and was standing despondently watching the Chinese men taking down the American army

tent when he remembered something. Throwing his leather apron over his head he ran into the blazing smithy before anyone noticed what he was doing.

"Stop him!" shrieked Kathleen, "He's going to kill himself!" It was too late, they could see him, a brightly lit figure, kneeling on the floor of the forge. Kathleen thought he had been driven mad at the sight of his old business being destroyed and was about to burn himself in its ruin.

He put a stop to this speculation by running out again and hauling something which he dropped on the ground outside, clear of the flames.

Barney arrived. Someone must have rung to tell him his business was on fire.

He got out of his car and stared at the huge blaze, unable to speak.

Mr Wilson saw him and pushed through the crowd which was now having to move back because they were being ushered to a safe distance by Shaun and the fire brigade.

"C'mere," he said, tugging, and gestured with his head. Barney followed him across to the object which had been dragged further from the fire and was lying in the dirt. It was the sign which had been so carefully and expertly forged in steel. **BARNEYS AUCTIONS**

Claude, the unsuccessful bidder for the painting was in the crowd. He shook his head when he saw the sign. He said, "Does no one round here understand how to use an apostrophe?"

The two men ignored him. "That's what caused all the trouble, Barney," George explained. "I'd just finished making it for you when the place caught fire. I meant to give it to you tomorrow, but you can have it now if you like."

Barney looked at the donor with blood-shot eyes. "Thanks a million, old pal!" he retorted. "I've always wanted to have a thing like that, but where the bloody hell am I going to put it? Why give me a sign to hang on the front of the building when you've gone and burned the place down on me?"

"Well, you can rebuild; what about the insurance?"

"Haven't got any insurance, never believed in it, and I still don't," he said intractably. "It's going to take me years to get back where I was before this happened." He kicked moodily at the tasteful sign half covered in dirt. Mr Wilson slunk away too overcome by the results of his actions to be able to think of any words of comfort.

The two men, having seen to the safety of their families, came to him with stricken faces; with them were Don and Kathleen. "Jeez, Barney, we're sorry about this. We didn't mean it to happen, and we wish there was some way of showing how sorry we are."

"You're sorry! You say you're sorry! How do you think I feel. Three years!! Three bloody years, of work I've put into this place and now it's all going off like a packet of crackers. Look at that!" he gestured with his hand towards the flames, as a distant cacophony of bells warned them of the arrival of more fire trucks. "You enjoy it, it's worth seeing, and so it should be. It cost thousands of quid to put on a show like that."

"We'll stay and help you, Barney; we'll work for nothing just to make up some of the losses."

"I've had all the help I want, thanks." He raised his voice to counter the noise of the bell as the fire truck rocketed along the road towards them. "Just clear off to Queensland as soon as you like, the sooner the quicker. You can come back in three years and burn the next lot down for me if you like."

The looked at him sadly. "We're not going anywhere, Barney, we haven't got enough money to buy our tickets and still keep us going until we can start earning something."

They were immersed in their own private world of concern as the helmeted experts set their shiny red and brass appliances to work, too late to save the collapsing building.

The numbing sense of shock felt by the people most closely connected with the fire was relieved by Barney reaching into his hip pocket and taking out his wallet. He counted out £100 in notes and handed it to Marie Dowd.

"I reckon you're the most sensible one out of this lot, which isn't saying much," he grumbled. "Go into Spencer Street Station and buy your tickets in the morning. Go on, take it. Whatever's left over of yours after we've sorted everything out we'll send on to you."

"Oh, blimey, Barney, it's too much," protested Tom. "We can't burn your place down and then borrow a hundred quid off you the same night. You're going to need that money, keep it; we'll get by somehow."

"It's not a loan," retorted Barney wearily, "It's an investment. The sooner you two and your families are out of the state the safer I'll be. Now, take it while your luck's in and clear off."

Marie clutched him before he could escape and gave him a kiss. "You're a nice man," she said. "I don't suppose any one has ever told you that before."

"You'll get your dough back again, no worries," said Tom. "That's the first thing we'll do when we get enough saved up; won't we, Chip?"

Chip nodded. "Too right, it's what you'd call a debt of honour." In their firm resolution to pay off the debt they had forgotten the advance on their furniture which was now aflame like everything else.

"After what's happened to me tonight the money doesn't make much difference one way or the other. All I want is for you lot to go away, and whatever happens don't leave any of your kids behind."

Kathleen kissed him too, but she had a question. "Where are they going to sleep tonight?"

Barney looked around him at the littered ground. "What's that, and that?" he asked, pointing.

"That's a tent and some of their mattresses and blankets."

Barney shrugged. "That's the answer; all they have to do is put up some tents in the paddock next door and bed down there for the night. They can have some chooks for breakfast if they like; it wouldn't worry me."

"But that's against the law. You can't put up tents there, it's not a camping ground."

"Clever girl! It is against law, and in the morning the police might come and turf them out, but that's tomorrow, isn't it?" Exasperated by people who could not see such a simple solution to their problems he turned away as the men, prompted by his advice, started to gather their scattered possessions.

Barneys Auctions was now as much alight as any building could be. Flames were pouring from every crevice in a huge flare of destruction that could not last long. The streams of water poured on it by a growing band of firemen had little effect except to add a plume of steam to the flames and black smoke writing the finish of his business across the night sky.

While he was standing a little apart his Chinese adversaries approached him in a body. They had something to say and their spokesman came to the front of the group.

He was an orator, much admired by his friends, who now listened carefully as he addressed Barney.

"It is sometimes difficult to see the underlying justice of our fate in this world," he said. Barney nodded; he could not see any justice in what was happening to him that night. "Still, a man must not weary heaven with complaints that his burden is too heavy. He must endure all

and pay the dues of his existence to the final penny." Barney could not have expressed the sentiments in those words and had some difficulty in making out what the man was talking about -- but it seemed not unreasonable. He waited to see what else was to come while everyone listened, wondering how long it would be before Barney's impatience overcame his apathy.

The man went on. "We feel however we cannot add to the burden laid on you this night. You were partly responsible for our loss but then we were partly responsible for your much greater loss in the destruction of your property."

His compatriots, though possibly not all of them understood what he was saying, nodded when he paused for effect.

"Though we do not hold ourselves responsible for the fire we were there when it began and possibly could have prevented it. This we failed to do. All men are responsible for their actions and though you have injured us through inaction perhaps we have injured you even more through our inaction."

Barney had nothing better to do that evening so he continued to listen as he watched the attempts of the firemen to save his property.

"Perhaps the balance before heaven is not equal because your loss is far greater than ours; we have lost time and labour and some livestock; you have lost everything. We have observed, furthermore, that though you are a hot-headed man you mean well and your actions are often kindly, even though they belie your words."

One of his followers came running up at this point. He carried on his arm a large wicker basket with a stout handle. It contained a hastily picked selection of vegetables including carrots and cauliflowers.

The orator received the basket and said, "Because we are uncertain about the balance of injury and recompense between us we have decided to let generosity overcome prudence and have decided to supply you and your family with vegetables for a year. This basket contains your supply for the first week." He handed it over. "We will be obliged if you will return the basket at your earliest opportunity."

Barney looked at the deputation, unhappily clutching his second gift for the night. It was a small matter compared to the thriving business he had lost, but very touching. He could admonish, he could complain, he could hector and bully, but words of gratitude did not come easily and he could think of nothing to say to his new friends. They understood and walked away after the orator had tapped him lightly on the shoulder, leaving the basket of vegetables.

"They're lovely and fresh," said Kathleen, inspecting the offering. "Just been picked a few moments ago. Wasn't that nice of them. They're very kind people, Dad." She thoughtfully placed the cashbox and bell in with the vegetables.

"I'm goin' to miss them," said Mr Wilson. "I done their horse-shoes for years. That feller talking to you, he's a real educated man, talks like a book once he gets going. I reckon he could'a been prime minister of China if he'd stayed in the old country."

"He sounds as though he writes Chinese proverbs for a living," replied Barney, the gloom of the occasion starting to settle on him again. "A year's supply of vegies is all right but I'd sooner have the business back."

Kathleen stood close to her father in sympathy. "They can't burn the block of land, Dad. We'll start again bigger and better than ever. Don't you worry about that."

Barney shifted restively at this statement.

She said, "Next time we'll have a nice brick building with windows and skylights and a roll up door -- and there'll be concrete on the floor so you can wheel heavy things in and out without struggling like you were before."

"Don't talk rubbish, Kath. How many times do I have to tell you -- if you haven't got any socks you can't pull them up. Talking about a new building is all very well but what are we going to use for money. I spent a lot buying this place. The building was nothing but it was full of valuable stock. I suppose I can get an overdraft at the bank but it's not going to run to any fancy buildings like you're talking about."

"You're forgetting the insurance."

"I'm forgetting nothing; the place isn't insured and never has been. You know I don't believe in insurance."

"Well, I do, and it is insured!"

"Don't argue with me, girl. I should know, shouldn't I? After all I own this bloody bonfire."

"That just goes to prove you don't know everything, because it is insured. I had an assessor out here one day when you were at an auction, and I gave him a list of the stock that Don and I had made up and I insured the place and everything in it."

Barney was staggered at this revelation of his daughter's duplicity. For the first time in years he could not think of a retort and could only enquire weakly, "How much?"

Kathleen went on, "I took the money for the premiums out of the tin, just a bit every day; that was the week you were raving about business being so terrible. Maggie helped, she said it was nice that there was at least one sensible person in the family. She hid any letters from the insurance company and gave them to me. Anyway it's insured in the name of Barney O'Connell and you should get £50 for the building, which was as high as they would go, and £4000 for the stock."

Barney was about to complain that the stock was greatly undervalued in this estimate but, considering the weakness of his position, asked instead, "Did you forge my signature to the insurance papers?"

"Of course not," replied Kathleen. "I signed them for you. Don't forget we have the same initials. I told the insurance man I would have the papers signed and I did. He got the papers back signed K.B. O'Connell and he was perfectly satisfied. You're Kevin Barney O'Connell and I'm Kathleen Brenda O'Connell. Now, do you want to tell the insurance company tomorrow that it was all a mistake, you don't believe in insurance and they can keep their money?"

His silence reassured her on this point and she went on. "We'll get a proper builder and do the job nicely. I know you're just as likely to want to build the place yourself and save money but you're not going to get away with it because I know the room you built on to our house," she said with some irritation. "I had to sleep in it for years. No, this is going to work out nicely. As soon as we've seen the plans and you've signed a contract with a builder Don and I can get married and have our honeymoon while it's being built."

Don, who had wandered up, heard this last statement. He staggered back against a fireman and they both stumbled and nearly fell over something lying on the ground.

"That's mine," exclaimed Barney, striding forward and standing the object upright. It was the metal sign that had caused all the excitement of the night. "If we have a cream brick front on the building it should stand out a treat. I'll slap a coat of -- " He was about to say 'camouflage

paint' but caught his daughter's eye and amended the words to 'black enamel'. "Yair, a coat of black enamel and it'll last for years.

He and Don lifted the sign into the back of the blitz buggy then they all turned to watch the dying stages of the fire.