

CHAPTER 13

As the next two years are fully documented in a previous book, *The Eye of the Beholder*, there is no point in repeating the story here. Suffice it to say that I was not happy at Montsalvat, and at the end of the second year decided I was unsuited to communal life and moved into a house that I had bought on a sudden impulse after a heated debate between Jorgensen and myself. It was by no means the first occasion on which we had met head-on, and I had usually given way, but this time Gilda was involved and I was not prepared to have him dictate to me about where she should be sent to school.

For the past two years she had been going to a small local school with the other three Montsalvat children, Sebastian, Saskia, and Sigmund, but the time had come for them to move into a higher grade, and there the dispute began. Anxious that Gilda have nothing but the best, or what I thought to be the best, I had decided on a rather snobbish school called Tintern, while Seb, Sas, and Sig were to go to Eltham High.

'There must be no special privileges for your daughter here,' the Master had proclaimed. 'So, if she is to stay at Montsalvat with me [note the 'me'!], she must share the same conditions as the others.'

The argument, as usual, took place around the dinner table and grew heated; everybody had opinions but none of them supported me and when someone on whom I thought I could depend stood up and shouted: 'Why don't you use your brains and *think*, you silly bitch?', that was the end, and I walked out. A walk along a shady road is always a good idea if you want to cool your temper, and mine had scarcely begun to cool when I saw the house.

It was an unpretentious place, redeemed by its lovely garden.

I had often admired it, and had heard it was for sale, but until I saw the notice on the gate, no thought of buying it had occurred to me. Now I went in and asked the price. It was nothing excessive and well within my means—the house at Castlecrag could pay for it three times over—so I asked if I could have a look inside, saw its possibilities, and said that I would buy it, never dreaming what a bargain I had got.

As well as the lovely garden, there was a considerable amount of land below the house and what I thought to be a largish shed but proved to be another house, consisting of one large room, a kitchen and a veranda. It was partly hidden by some fruit trees and I had scarcely noticed it when I had made my purchase, but it was not long before I realised that by expending a few hundred pounds, I could add another room and a bathroom, and have a snug little cottage. This was eagerly snapped up by the mathematics teacher from Eltham High. He had a young wife, and it was exactly what they needed, as the rent was low.

The cheque from the *SMH* continued to make its regular appearance, I had the income from my Aunt Belle's estate and the rent from the cottage and felt that I was singularly fortunate. Admittedly I was still alone, but that was less disturbing than it had been before as I had grown accustomed to it. And if there were times when someone stayed the night, none was more than a temporary guest.

Montsalvat was only a short walk away, so Gilda still had the companionship of the three children there, rode their ponies, splashed with them in the swimming pool, and suffered no loss because of my sudden departure from the place. Nor did she seem to have suffered any ill effects from having been deprived of her father, who at this time was preparing to leave Ula and go to Europe with his new love, Ethel.

Tranquillity and I are never more than passing acquaintances, and this temporary calm in a stormy life was suddenly disturbed when Roberta sent a telegram saying she was coming down to see me. Poor Edgar had died since I had seen her last, and I had often wondered how she was coping with the responsibility

of caring for three young children without his forbearance and support. Something told me that she was in some sort of crisis and that I was about to be involved.

She omitted to tell me when she would arrive, and I was away from the house when the taxi left her at the gate. With unerring instinct, she found her way to the local pub. It was mid-afternoon and the pub was full of thirsty men. Roberta was a marked success, and when she finally appeared, accompanied by two men in a delivery van, she was in what can only be described as 'high spirits'. There was a certain clash of opinions when she urged her escorts to accompany her inside, and it took some persuasion on my part to convince them that they would not be welcome. I think they had come in the expectation of a jolly foursome, and they were very much put out when these hopes were dashed. Eventually they left, and Roberta walked unsteadily along the path, through the door, and collapsed into a chair.

'Darling, I'm pregnant!' she announced, accompanied by peals of laughter.

I have to admit that there are times when I resemble my disapproving aunt, and this was one of them. The resemblance grew stronger when she told me who the second party was. I was too dumbfounded to speak. I had no reason to disbelieve her and it was too preposterous for even Roberta to invent. The man in the case was one of Sydney's pillars of the church, a man of the cloth of so much piety and unblemished reputation that even now, long after he has died, I dare not call him by name. She wept unrestrainedly for quite some time and begged for another drink. Aunt Belle-like, I refused and made her go to bed, gave her strong black coffee, and let her go to sleep.

Next day she was her usual self and gave me some details of the affair. They had set up a love-nest in a back lane in the city and there they had their orgies in the afternoon.

'He said he would like to fuck me so hard that it would come out my mouth,' she said triumphantly.

Finally, I learned the real purpose of her visit. I had written

to her when Edgar died and enclosed a photo of my new house and the cottage in the garden. In her reply she said she thought that it looked charming and wished that she could come and live in it, which was precisely what she now proposed to do! She had decided to have the baby and would live in the cottage, knit baby clothes, and think beautiful thoughts until it arrived.

Aunt Belle would have been proud of me had she heard my response to this astounding proposition. Poor Roberta wilted under the tirade that descended onto her.

What did she propose to do with Michael and Nicky and Mary while this fairytale took place? She hadn't thought of that. Was the reverend gentleman prepared to support her and the child? She thought he would, but wasn't sure.

It occurred to me that she had a rare opportunity for blackmail, but I put the thought aside; Roberta was not the type. In the end, I bullied her into going back to Sydney and having an abortion, no novelty to her as, to my knowledge, she had already had three. So, calm but resigned, she said goodbye and did as I had said.

But Roberta had not finished with me yet. A few months had elapsed when a letter arrived announcing her intention to go to Paris and visit Michael. It appeared that she had become friendly with the wife of the Canadian consul and had persuaded her to take the boy with her when her husband had received the Paris posting. Michael was then twelve years old and still suffered from asthma, but wanted to be a ballet dancer, so Paris seemed a good place in which to practise arabesques. It also relieved Roberta of one of her responsibilities. Michael's legs had proved unequal to the strain, however, and his hostess was starting to regret her generosity. Would I have Nicky to come and stay with me while she was away?

Nicky! The wild little creature that had refused to be petted when he was a baby, who was intent on leaving home as soon as he could walk and had to be fastened to a tree with a rope around his waist—was I to have him come and live with me and totally disrupt my life? Rebel though he was, I had always

liked his independence, his bright mind, and the charm he had inherited from his mother. Also I had always wanted another child, a boy for preference, and here was one ready-made, and no ordinary child either, so I wrote to say that I would be pleased to have him.

But only under certain conditions. During her absence, I was to have complete control of Nicky's life. I would be responsible for his maintenance but must be empowered to negotiate the terms of any contract for film, radio, or stage performances, the money for which would be paid into a trust account in his name. Roberta agreed, and not long afterwards Nicky and his dog arrived. Roberta had pleaded that the dog be included in the deal.

His father's death had been a heavy blow to Nick. Neither his mother nor his half-brother, Michael, nor the little love-child, Mary, had counted for very much with him, but Edgar was his hero and the one person who had never failed him. Now this mainstay of his life was gone and the little dog, Bamby, had brought a degree of comfort. Nicky loved him dearly.

I met them at the airport. The car had what was known as a 'sunshine' roof and Nick insisted on standing upright on the front seat, his head protruding through the open roof, long hair flying in the wind, and Bamby dribbled saliva down my back. I had a Siamese cat who took one look at Bamby and was not seen again for several days. In spite of this rather inauspicious beginning, the new regime worked out quite well. Underneath his wild exterior, Nick was a sweet-natured child, and after recovering from his initial resentment at being bossed about by a woman, settled in quite happily and went off to school with Gilda and Seb and Sas and Sig from Montsalvat. He made friends with a boy called Gavin Bowie, and the pair spent a great deal of their time together, which led to a minor crisis that might have been a disaster.

I rarely went into town at night but had made an exception when a celebrated author came out from England and was being fêted at a dinner held in the Menzies Hotel. The first course had been served when a waiter touched me on the shoulder and

said that a message had come for me to say that Nick had met with an accident and would I please come home. The dinner was forgotten and I never knew what the famous man said in his after-dinner speech, but broke all the regulations in the drive back to Eltham to find Nicky sitting up in bed, his face rather pale and a nose that was squashed completely flat!

He and Gavin had found a boomerang and tried their skill by hurling this ancient weapon of the Aborigines across a paddock near the house. It had circled back as it was supposed to do and struck Nick just below his eyes.

A broken nose was nothing compared to the disaster that it could have caused, but Nicky Yardley's nose was no ordinary nose: it was attached to a boy whose future as a film star could well depend on its shape, and one for whom I had demanded full responsibility. So on the following day I took him down to Melbourne and, by the exercise of much persuasion and a degree of personality, managed to get an appointment with the leading plastic surgeon in Collins Street. The appointment was not until late in the afternoon, so we had lunch and I remember watching Nick devour a plate of sausages and chips with a malted milk to follow.

The surgeon, whose name I cannot recall, was not very pleased to see us, nor was he impressed when I told him the importance of restoring Nicky's nose to its original shape.

'I don't usually do cosmetic surgery,' he told me loftily, but after further entreaties on my part, he reluctantly agreed, adding that the reshaping had already been delayed too long and he must operate at once. So arrangements were made for Nick to be admitted to the Heidelberg hospital and, having delivered him there, I hurried back to Eltham, got a pair of Nick's pyjamas and his toothbrush and went back to Heidelberg.

I found him resting in a private ward, a plaster mask across his face and a pair of the blackest eyes ever seen outside the boxing ring. Oddly enough, he was not in any pain, nor had he been since the accident occurred.

The nurse on duty met me with a disapproving look. 'What

did you give him for lunch?' she asked. 'Don't you know it's highly dangerous to eat solid food before an operation?'

I did know, but had not realised that Nick would be hustled into the operating theatre at such short notice. Apparently he had been violently sick while under the anaesthetic and had given everyone a fright. He was discharged from hospital after the second day, and they were not sorry to see him go, as he had amused himself by hurling paper darts at the passers-by from the balcony of his room. The nose was fully restored, however, and his eyes soon resumed their former shape.

Despite my concern about his nose, Nick's career as an actor did not progress beyond this point. I did nothing to promote it—rightly or wrongly, I felt that he was in need of a little less attention and should be allowed to lead the life of an ordinary child. Had there been directors clamouring for his services I might have felt otherwise, but his reputation had not followed him from Sydney. Nobody in Melbourne was aware that the star of *Bush Christmas* was among them, and I made no attempt to tell them. Perhaps another Peter Finch was lost, but I did what I thought was best for Nick, and the life of an actor, even a Peter Finch, is not so rosy that anyone should envy him.

When Nick was seven and playing TylTyl in *The Bluebird*, he had attracted the attention of a certain Professor Giblin, who, having no children of his own, took a keen interest in other people's. Nick won a special place in his heart and he became a sort of deputy grandfather to the engaging little boy, kept a watchful eye on him, and, I have no doubt, contributed to his upkeep after Edgar died. Roberta had spoken of him in glowing terms, so I was pleased when he wrote to say he would be passing through Melbourne on his way home from Canberra—his permanent home was in Hobart—and would like to visit us in Eltham. I found him to be a gentle, humorous and lovable old man, whose unassuming manner belied his reputation as an economist of world stature and a distinguished man of letters. He and Nick had two happy days together, and before he left he talked to me about Nick's future.

He did not need to be told that I had taken on an enormous responsibility and that there were times when I wondered how long I could continue to cope. Nick was now twelve years old and outgrew his clothes at an alarming rate. There was also the matter of his education. Like Gilda and the three at Montsalvat, he had progressed beyond the local school and must go somewhere else. Gilda was to go to Tintern in the new year, but what was to be done with Nick? There was Eltham High, of course, and it seemed he must go there, but Giblin had other ideas. He had been making enquiries and had found that Ivanhoe Grammar had an excellent reputation and suggested that Nick should go there, not as a day boy but as a boarder, and at his expense.

I cannot pretend that this was not an enormous relief, as I had recently received a letter from the editor of the *SMH* informing me that he had reluctantly decided to dispense with *The Conways*—it cost too much and a syndicated strip could be had for half the price, from America of course. Consequently I was once more faced with the uncertainties of working as a freelance writer. But my luck—or was it Jupiter?—had not completely deserted me. I sent an appeal to my friend, Nell Stirling, and she wrote back to say she was in need of a daytime serial with a strong appeal to women. So I cooked up a story about a woman whose husband was unfaithful to her—it was called *A Woman Scorned*—and got busy thinking up ways in which she could make the cad regret his infidelity. It had the ring of truth, was a big success and drew top ratings when it went to air.

I had had five years of earning easy money with time to spare for better things. Perhaps I had failed to take advantage of my opportunity, but I had been preoccupied with the business of living and had learnt many things, so it was not entirely wasted. Also, I had taken out the play that had defeated me before and worked on it again, and felt it was not an unworthy successor to *The Touch of Silk*. It now had a central theme and a bite, whereas it had been flabby and weak in its original version. When the Commonwealth Government announced it would award a prize of five hundred pounds for a three-act play as part of its

Jubilee celebrations, *Granite Peak* was among the seventy plays submitted, and I felt there was a good chance that it would win the prize. The judges decided otherwise, however, and a play called *Tether a Dragon*, by Kylie Tennant, received the award instead.

It is possible that Kylie needed the five hundred pounds far more than I did, but she did not need the boost to her reputation as a writer in the way that I did. I was filled with disgust at the rubbish I had been churning out. Top ratings did not impress me in the least, they merely indicated the lack of taste on the part of the people who listened. I wanted to be recognised as a serious playwright, and had hoped that, by winning the award for *Granite Peak*, I might be restored to the position I had occupied in 1928. Had the critic on the *Bulletin* not hailed me as 'Australia's first genuine playwright'?

Disappointment turned to indignation when I read Kylie's play. It reminded me of the *Madame Bovary* play in its initial form—a mishmash of scenes and characters. What made it worse, it was about Henry Parkes, a pompous old politician, not a beautiful woman who loved unwisely and met with a tragic fate and was never a crashing bore.

That *Granite Peak* should be judged inferior to this non-play seemed like a personal insult, and my anger mounted steadily. I had given Australia two good plays. One had been forgotten, the other had been ignored and, so far as I was concerned, that was the end. I would never write another play again. I would leave Australia to the Philistines and seek recognition overseas.

I was then close to fifty years of age. How much time did I have left? I asked myself. Thirty years, at the most. Perhaps it was already too late to start another life, but I still looked young enough to pass for thirty-five. To hell with everything and everyone—I was going to try my luck in London.

The euphoria of the postwar years had not yet subsided and there was a rush of Australians to Europe that resembled a stampede. Air travel had not advanced beyond the experimental stage, and the boats that went via Suez or Cape Town were

crowded to capacity, so it was necessary to book several months ahead in order to secure a berth. I went to the Flotto Lauro shipping company and booked a two-berth cabin on the *Marco Polo*, which was due to sail in February 1952. It was then September 1951, which gave me ample time to simmer down and consider the consequences of the decision I had made.

First and foremost, there was Gilda. She was then fourteen and had reached the critical stage of puberty. How would she react to this new disruption to her life? There was no question whatever as to whether or not she should come with me—the only alternative would be to send her back to Ula, which was quite unthinkable. Fourteen was a good age at which to be introduced to the marvels of Europe; she was old enough to appreciate them, yet young enough to adjust herself to a totally different world. She would go to school in England, make new friends, and acquire an English accent. The advantages would heavily outweigh the disadvantages, so I convinced myself.

There still remained the question of what to do about Nick. He had been at Ivanhoe Grammar for more than a year and appeared to be quite happy there, though there had been a painful period when dear old Professor Giblin had died. Perhaps he had known that the end was not far off when he came to stay with us, but the telegram that came from his wife and said: 'Lyn died peacefully last night' was a stunning blow and gave me the painful task of telling poor Nick that, for the second time in his short life, death had deprived him of the being he loved best.

He took it manfully. He shed no tears and barely said a word, but his face went very white and the set expression round his mouth told me that the blow had hit him very hard. He shook his head when I asked if he would like to come back to Eltham with me, and I stifled an impulse to take him in my arms, remembering how he had resisted Roberta when she had tried to embrace him as a baby. Before I left I had asked to see his housemaster, James Murray, and told him what had happened. James promised to keep a watchful eye on Nick, especially that night when the lights in the dormitory were out and he would

be alone with his grief. James kept his word, and a bond of affection between man and boy was forged in those lonely hours, a bond that lasted until Nick grew up and his restless spirit took him wandering around the world.

Giblin, the good old man, had left sufficient money in a trust fund to pay Nick's fees at Ivanhoe Grammar and take him to the university if he chose an academic career. This assured his immediate future but what was to become of him when I went away? Roberta appeared to have forgotten him, she was still in London and wrote to say she had met a white Russian living there and planned to marry him. Then James Murray said that his parents who lived in Hawthorn would be happy to have Nick come and live with them. So Nick had a home, James assumed the role of elder brother, and my conscience was at rest.