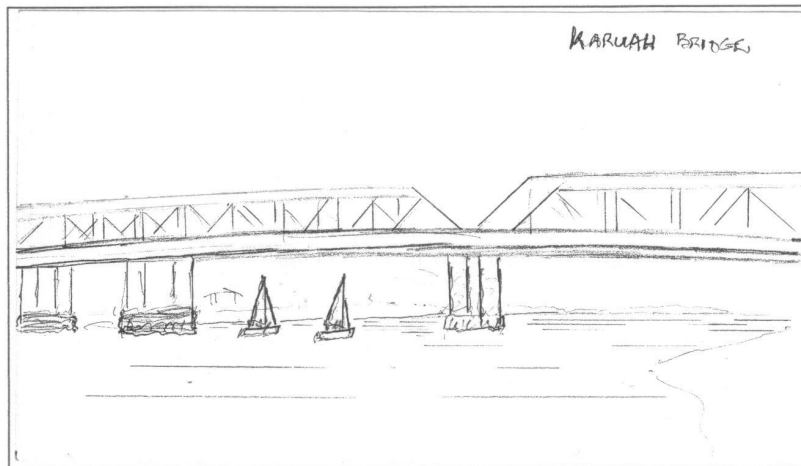


## CHAPTER 5

### Snapper Island

There was the Karuah bridge and here they were on the water at last. Mark and Liz, in their dark blue *Sapphire* were three boat lengths away to starboard, and Tom, Cate and Bill in lovely green *Emerald*. Under the influence of the ebb the two boats were moving slowly towards the gap of the second arch of the bridge into the channel leading to Port Stephens. After weeks of preparations their adventure had begun.



Bill looked back towards the launching ramp as it was disappearing behind the boatshed. Daddy was there with Mr Parfitt. They were talking to another man. When Bill gave a final wave they all three waved back. Cate was steering and Tom was busy stowing the last of the food, a couple of fruit cakes cooked by Mrs Ryan, in one of three plastic water tight drums secured between the bulkhead bracing the foredeck and the forward thwart. Under each of the side decks and

projecting forward under the foredeck was an oar, their auxiliary power if they ran out of wind.

“1540,” Mark called across to them.

“We’ve timed it just right, I reckon.”

“Watch the tide doesn’t carry you onto one of the piers.”

Liz and Cate had travelled with Mr Ryan in their car towing *Emerald* while Mark, Tom and Bill had travelled with Mr Parfitt in his creaky old Landrover towing *Sapphire* and carrying an old canoe on its roof. Cate called across to Liz as the boats passed under the bridge: “Are you any further forward in working out how your father managed it?” The question which had puzzled them all was something neither girl had dared to broach in the car on the way north.

“A mystery worthy of Agatha Christie,” responded Liz with a grin. “Not the faintest glimmer of a solution as to how he did it,” she continued, mixing her metaphors.

“Dad moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform,” volunteered Mark as he watched the sails on *Sapphire* to see that they were working at their most efficient in the light easterly breeze.

“How much the more powerful is some agent,” said Tom, “so much the more does he achieve not only what he intends but also in the manner he intends.”

“Where did you get that from?” asked Liz.

“From Dad,” said Tom. “I think he got it from St Thomas.”

“Who? The Apostle?”

“No, Aquinas—the philosopher,” responded Tom. “It was the only answer that Dad would give when we raised the question with him.”

“I just know that he knows more than he is saying,” said Cate.

“Mother was so dead against it,” said Liz. “Daddy must be a miracle worker.”

“I told you prayer would do the trick,” said Cate grinning across at her. “Anyway, we’re all here and we’re off on what I know is going to be a great adventure. It will make the fun we had during our stay at *O’Reilly’s* look tame, I just know it.” Cate was referring here to a holiday the two families had spent in the Lamington National Park on the Queensland border the previous year. It was there that Tom, Cate

and Bill had first met Mark and Liz. They had had some excitement on *that* holiday.

They cleared the bridge quickly and the light breeze enabled the two boats, heavily laden with gear and crew as they were, to reach south down the channel with the wind on their port beam. Ten minutes later Tom called across to Mark: "We'll have to watch our navigation here." He consulted the map of Port Stephens on his knee which he had placed in a clear plastic cover to protect it from the elements.

"That channel to the south east is the one we don't want," he said pointing to the left. The water ahead of them was divided into two by land. One arm headed south and the other to the south east. Half a mile or so ahead were two low masses of land one on each side of the southern channel. "We want to go between the two islands."

"May I have a look at the chart, Tom," said Cate. "Here. You take the helm." She handed him the tiller and he passed the map to her as she moved down the boat.

"Swan Island to the west and Wurrung Island to the east," she said reading from it. The edge of the channel was marked with posts. "What are these grey shaded areas, Tom?"

"Oyster leases."

"We won't want to get tangled up in them, will we?"

"We seem to be going faster than we are sailing," Liz called across to them.

"It's the tide giving us a hand," said Mark. "We must be making two knots or more over the bottom. Tom," he said, "wouldn't it be madness trying to sail against it?"

"I'll say."

After twenty minutes or so the two boats were approaching the southern end of Wurrung Island. Bill was sitting near the mast on *Emerald* facing aft. "I see another boat coming out from Karuah," he called and the others turned and looked back up the reach. Beneath the road bridge at Karuah, now a mile or so behind them, there was a single sail.

“Hullo. We’ll be tacking shortly,” called Tom and their attention was drawn back to their heading. “The channel is changing direction to the south east.” Ahead of them was a red channel marker.

“Shouldn’t it be green?” asked Bill.

“No. Because they colour them according as you go from the sea upstream,” said Tom. “If we were sailing upstream to Karuah we would need to keep the marker on our port side. Going downstream we keep the port markers on our starboard side.”

“That’s right,” said Cate. “That’s how Daddy made his big mistake in the Myall River on *Antico*.”

Tom consulted the handheld compass he carried on a cord around his neck. It was really a bushwalker’s compass but it was handy even for sailing. On *Sapphire*, in contrast, there was a compass fixed to the deck just behind the centreboard case where the helmsman could check his bearing. The skippers of both boats tightened the sheets, that is, the ropes which controlled the two sails on their boats, mainsail and jib, bringing the clews of the sails more towards the centreline of the boat and the two boats began to sail as close to the wind as they could.

“How close to the wind can we sail?” asked Bill.

“About 45 degrees,” Mark replied from the other boat.

“How many points off the wind is that, Bill?” asked Cate.

“Ah . . . four,” said Bill after a short pause for calculation.

“But we don’t actually sail that well,” said Tom. “Because of leeway.”

“Except under a windward going tide,” Mark called back with a grin. “Like this one. We’re certainly doing better than I would have thought.”

Both boats were nearing the south western shore of the channel but *Sapphire* was to leeward.

“Water!” Mark called.

“Why did he say that?” Bill asked Cate.

“That indicates to Tom that he needs to tack,” Cate replied. “If he can’t he will go aground on the oysters.”

“Ready about!” Tom called to his crew. Cate took the starboard jib sheet in her hand, pulled it out of the cam cleat on the starboard side of the boat but held it at the same tension so that the jib would not lose its shape until the boat came into the wind. “Lee-oh!” called Tom and put the helm down so that the bow of the boat swung to port and across the wind. At the same time he kept the tension on the mainsheet so that the mainsail kept driving until the wind angle caused it to stall before it quickly filled on the opposite tack. As the boat tacked Tom transferred to the new windward side of the boat, the starboard side. Cate, meantime, kept the tension on the jib sheet even when the wind began to fill it on the opposite tack. This had the advantage of carrying the bow of the boat through the eye of the wind.

“Pull it on, Bill!” she said as she released it and Bill quickly pulled the port hand jib sheet through the cam cleat until it was tight.

“Ease the sheet just a little, Bill,” said Tom. “It’s too tight. An inch or two.” Bill allowed the sheet to slip back through the cam cleat and then jammed it again. “That’s it,” said Tom.

A moment or two after *Emerald* commenced this manoeuvre, Mark and Liz on *Sapphire* did the same so that both boats were now on starboard tack heading a little north of north east with *Sapphire* behind but to windward of *Emerald*. Because of the narrowness of the channel it was not long before the two boats tacked back onto port tack again. They continued to keep close company.

“Which is Snapper Island?” Liz asked.

“It’s the large lump of land south east of us,” said Cate consulting the map.

“There appear to be plenty of trees on it,” said Liz.

“Let’s hope there is some sandy beach,” said Mark, “or we’ll have some fun trying to secure the boats.”

“There are supposed to be goats on the island,” said Tom. “At least that is what Dad was told when he made some enquiries.”

“Once we get beyond that mark,” said Mark indicating another red channel marker a hundred yards or so ahead, “we should be able to lay the island on one tack.”

“Look how the tide is carrying us to the east,” said Tom. They were heading towards the red marker and looking to pass it close on their starboard side but the tide was carrying them away from it.

“We’ll have to bear away,” said Mark and the two skippers eased the sheets of the sails of their boats and steered them more towards the south to counter the effects of the outgoing tide.

“The island is getting larger moment by moment,” said Liz.

“We’ll be there in no time.”

“Look at all those oysters to the right of it,” said Bill. “I hope there will be room for us to sail up to the island.” The water to the west of the island was dotted with blackened stakes marking the presence of oyster racks and, here and there, with poles carrying signs proclaiming the identification number of each oyster lease.

Snapper Island loomed above them as the two boats approached the north western point. They rounded the last of the poles and headed south along the island shore.

“It looks abominably rocky,” said Liz.

“You’re telling me,” said Tom. “What do you think, Mark?” he asked.

“It looks more promising just along the shore a little,” said Mark.

“I see some sand,” said Bill.

The two boats ghosted gently along the shore towards the only patch of sand in sight in a little bay. The easterly wind, now grown faint because of the blanketing effect of the land, caused them to tack the boats slowly several times before they reached it.

“First part of romantic voyage of exploration completed,” said Liz as they reached the shore. The two skippers rounded their boats up and slid off the side decks into the shallows.

“Let’s pull the boats up onto the sand,” said Tom.

“And we can look for a good campsite,” said Cate.

“We should drop the sails first,” said Mark, “not that there is much worry about the wind blowing the boats over.”

“Cate. How about you, Liz and Bill carrying the camping gear up the sand while Mark and I unrig the boats?” said Tom. “You can look for a good campsite while you are at it.”

“Okay. Come on Lizzie. Bill! Where’s that blasted ship’s boy gone?”

“He’s heading around the rocks over there,” said Liz.

“Bill! Come on,” she called to him. “You can go exploring later.”

“There’s that boat we saw following us down from Karuah,” said Bill to the others as he returned. They looked along the rocky coast to the north. The boat, sailing to windward close hauled, was about five hundred yards off the northern point of the island.

“What a curious shape,” said Mark. The boat had a high blunt bow and a great sweep in its sheer line.

“It looks like a sailing surf boat,” said Cate.

“It’s gunter rigged,” said Tom.

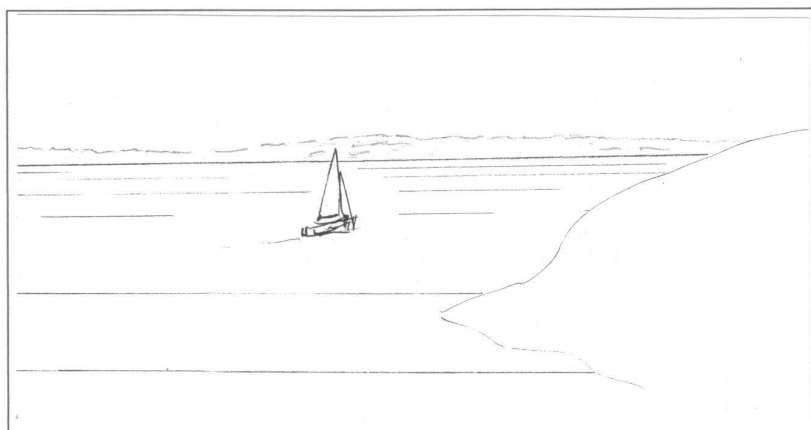
“So it is,” said Mark.

“What does that mean?” asked Liz.

“The mainsail is set on a yard which is pulled up close to the mast,” said Tom. “So there are three spars instead of the two that we have.”

“It’s going pretty fast,” said Bill.

“Yes,” said Mark, “it is certainly getting along.” The boat appeared only to have one person on board. It soon passed from their sight past the northern point.



Tom and Mark set to work to lower and stow the sails, lashing the mainsails to the booms and tying off the jibs so they would not blow

about if the wind picked up. Cate and Bill released the lashings that held the nets covering the water tight drums on *Emerald*, removed them from the boat and carried them up the sand to a grassy patch. Mark showed Liz how to release the wooden boxes on *Sapphire* and Cate and Bill helped her to carry them up the shore. They removed the plastic water containers and carried them up too. After a bit of exploring of the nearby shore the three came back to the two boys at the boats.

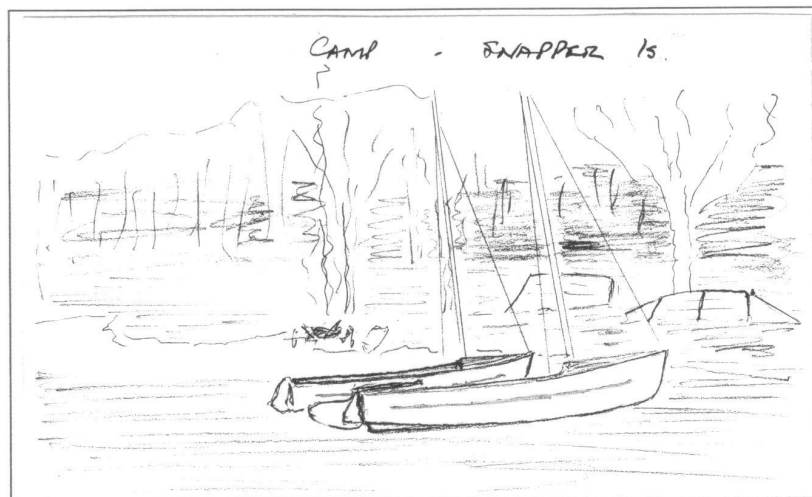
“There doesn’t seem to be much better camping than this spot just above the beach,” said Cate. “There is lantana everywhere and we would need a machete to get into it.”

“The goats aren’t making much of an impression on it,” said Liz.

“Not that we have seen any goats,” said Bill.

“What about you getting a fire going, Bill,” said Tom. “We’ll have a cup of tea and put the tents up.”

“Good idea,” said Mark. “The girls can help us to roll the boats up the beach.”



Bill went off to get some of the driftwood which was lying along the shore to light a fire while the others rolled *Sapphire* up the sand using the two inflatable rubber rollers Mark and Liz had brought.



“A bit further,” said Mark. “You can see where the high water mark is and we need to be above that. It’s just occurred to me, Tom. How high will the next tide be? If it is higher than the last the boats will need to be well above this high water mark.” Tom went to *Emerald* and consulted his tide tables.

“This morning’s tide was 4 ft 11 inches,” he called back. “That is the highest tide this week. The next one will be about 4 ft 7 inches. We should be right if we drag them above the last high tide mark.” The four hauled *Emerald* up the beach till the boat was alongside *Sapphire*.

The smell of smoke nearby showed that Bill had been successful in his efforts at getting a fire going.

“Cate,” he called. “Where is the big billy?”

“I’ll get it for him,” said Cate to the others. “I think it’s at the bottom of the third drum.”

“Let’s hope we don’t get a wind change tonight from the west,” said Mark.

“All right. To be on the safe side let’s haul them up another six feet or so beyond last high tide mark,” said Tom. They did so and the boys then tied both boats with the lines to nearby shrubs.

“It’s nice to know they are all secure.”

“Let’s have that cup of tea,” said Cate. “Bill!” she called. “How is the tea going?”

After the tea had been poured and drunk—reasonably strong, with powdered milk and one spoon of sugar each—they set to work to pitch the tents. Tom and Cate pitched the Paddy’s *Era*. It had been used by their father on long trips in Tasmania and the Snowy Mountains before he and Mrs Ryan had married. Liz and Mark pitched their more modern French *André Jamet* tent which was held in shape by aluminium wands fitted into sleeves attached to the tent walls and secured at each end by slots in the tent fabric. The boys were to share the three man *Era* and the two girls the *Jamet*.

“Remember the last time we pitched these two tents together?” Cate asked at large.

“On Lamington Plateau near Luke’s Bluff,” said Mark.  
“The night you saw the lights in the forest, Tom,” said Liz.  
“Ah, those were the days,” said Bill. “Ouch!” he said as a shoe thrown by Tom connected with him.  
“Got him,” said Tom.  
“That boy will come to a nasty end,” said Cate.  
“I was only making an observation,” said Bill in an injured tone.  
“I know what you were saying,” said Tom.  
“Poor Bill,” said Liz. “Like all great artists his art is just not appreciated.”  
“Thank heaven for closed cell foam mats to sleep on,” said Cate changing the subject. “Much more comfortable than for the old bushwalkers who used to sleep on newspaper or even on the ground.”  
“Did they?” asked Liz.  
“That’s what Daddy says,” responded Cate. They completed the pitching of the tents and put in their bedding.

“Now, what about a circumnavigation of the island before dinner,” said Tom. “We might satisfy Bill’s itch for exploration.”  
“Can I take a fishing line,” asked Bill. “The map says that you can get bream nearby.”  
“Better if you save the fishing until we get back,” said Tom. “Bring the field glasses.”  
“What about this fire,” said Cate. “Let’s build it up to keep it going. It will save time relighting it when we get back. Bill seems to have got plenty of firewood.”  
“We could always use the stoves,” said Mark.  
“It would be better to save them until we need them,” said Tom.  
“When it is pouring with rain,” said Cate.  
“It’s not going to rain on this trip,” said Liz. They built up the fire and then banked it down by covering it with large stones from the beach.

They set off south from their camp down the island coast along the rocky shore.  
“Be careful of your footing, girls,” Mark said. “It’s a long way to the doctor.”

“There’s a way up through the trees over there,” said Cate. They left the shore and pushed their way through low scrub into a small clearing beneath a large tree.

“It’s a fig,” said Tom.

“With buttress roots,” said Bill.

“It’s an enormous one,” said Cate. “Look at the size of the root system.” Spreading out from the trunk of the fig tree right round its circumference were great buttress roots which extended some 30 feet or more.

“It’s not much smaller than that one they showed us at the bottom of Stockyard Creek last year,” said Mark. He was referring to their Queensland holiday. They clambered over the root system and worked their way towards a wall of lantana behind it.

“It’s too thick,” said Cate. “We’ll never get through it.”

“There is a break over here,” said Bill leading the way through the lantana into another small clearing.

“Hullo,” said Tom. “What’s this?”

“What’s what?” asked Cate.

“I don’t believe it,” said Tom. “It’s a stinging tree.”

“*Gympie Gympie*,” said Mark. “It *is* too.” The five gathered around a small tree in the middle of the clearing with leaves the size of dinner plates. They had ample reason to recognise the tree as it had played a big part in their adventures on the Lamington Plateau the previous year.

“Look at the fur on the leaves,” said Liz. On the surface of the leaves was a faint grey fuzz of tiny hairs.

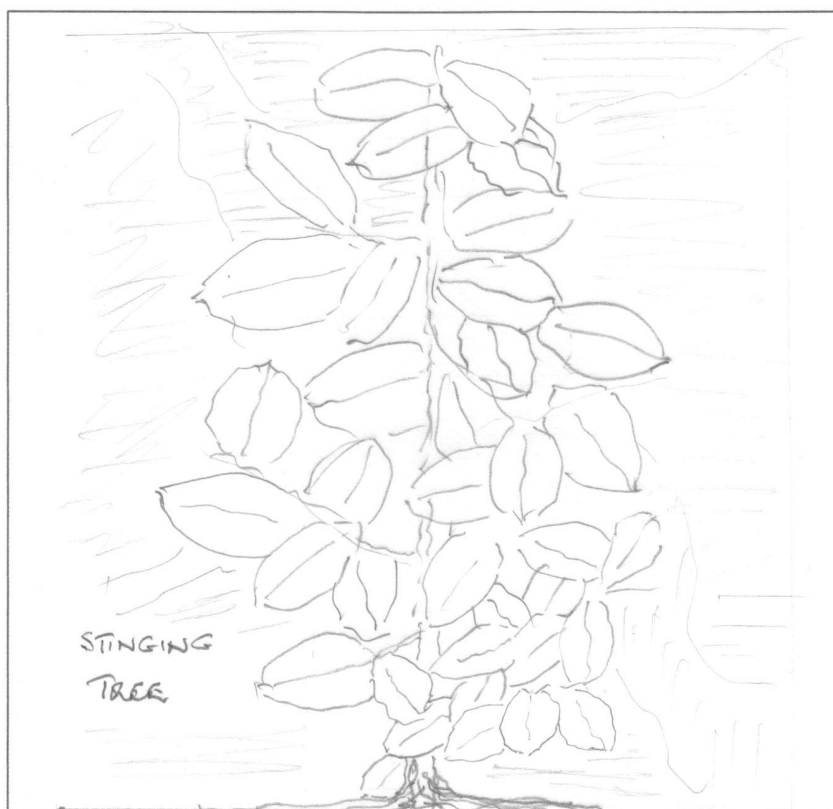
“Every one of them a needle full of poison,” said Mark.

“What is a stinging tree doing on an island in the middle of Port Stephens?” said Cate.

“I guess there must have been a lot of rainforest around Port Stephens in the early days of settlement,” said Tom. “A lot of forest was chopped down to get at the Red Cedar in the 1800s. This is obviously what is left of it.”

“Remember Daddy said he bumped into a baby stinging tree years ago in Kangaroo Valley,” said Cate.

“And his hand was numb for a week,” said Bill.



“We had better keep a good lookout from here on,” said Mark. “We don’t want to get stung.”

“When it’s so far from a doctor,” said Cate.

“Let’s get back to the shore,” said Tom. “We can’t go any further here.” They retraced their steps taking very careful note now of the nature of the bushes they were pushing through and made their way back to the rocky shore.

A little further along they found another clearing and climbed up to see if they could get to the backbone of the island.

“Palm trees,” said Bill pointing to a clump of trees standing above the inevitable lantana.

“Cabbage Trees,” said Tom. “That’s their common name.”

“There’s another stinging tree,” said Cate.

“And another one over here,” said Mark pointing.

“At least there are no giant ones like they have at *O’Reilly’s*,” said Liz.

“No,” said Tom. “Not that we can see. But there may be one or two hidden in the depths of this jungle somewhere on the island.”

The lantana forced them back to the shore again but they were not far now from the south eastern end of the island and they soon found themselves rounding the point where the easterly wind was blowing quite vigorously. Small waves were breaking on the island’s eastern shore.

“It’s a good thing our camp is on the lee side,” said Mark.

“I wonder if there is any sandy beach on this side,” said Tom.

“These rocks are getting slippery,” said Liz.

“Yes. The waves have blown spray over them,” said Cate.

“And the tide is falling. Look at this seaweed,” said Mark.

“Looks like grapes,” said Cate as she studied the growth close to the water line.

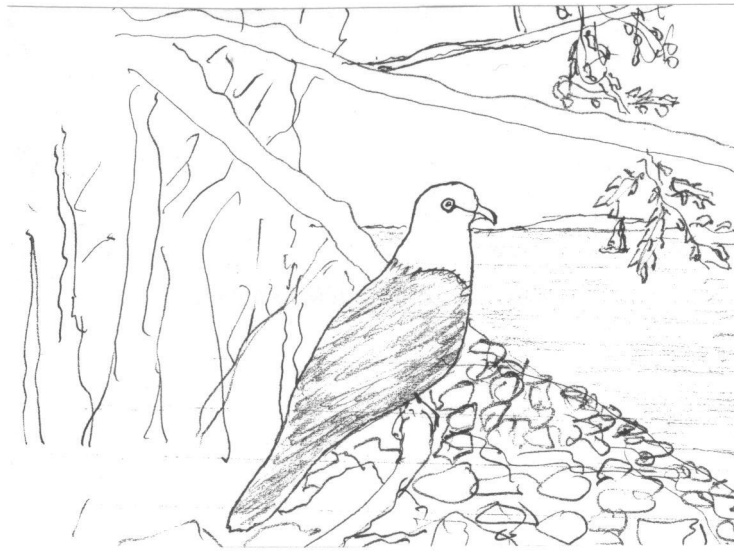
“Sea grapes,” said Bill.

More fig trees grew along the coast above the rocky shore. They walked north now. A few minutes later Mark pointed and said: “Why, that one is a strangler fig. Look how the host tree inside it has died.” The fig tree, obviously very much alive, was like a basket woven around the remnant of a dead tree. This fig was really a vine which had struck root at the base of the original tree and had grown up around it and strangled the life out of it. Suddenly a large bird appeared flying south along the shore towards them. As soon as it saw them it plunged into the foliage of one of the fig trees and then dropped down and sat on a rock about fifty feet away.

“Don’t move,” said Tom. They all stopped in mid stride and gazed at the bird which looked back at them. “It’s a White Headed Pigeon,” said Tom after a pause. “A rainforest bird.”

“Didn’t we see White Headed Pigeons in Queensland?” asked Cate.

The pigeon gazed back at them seemingly unperturbed by their presence. As soon as they began to move, however, it took flight and flew back along the shore to the north and disappeared into the foliage of another fig tree.



“All that water and only one boat,” said Tom looking to seaward. There was a small yacht about a mile away running downwind on a heading which would take it well to the south of the island.

“Look! porpoises!” Bill called suddenly. The others turned to the sea close at hand and followed his pointed finger. A number of finned grey backs appeared momentarily above the waves and disappeared from sight to be replaced by others.

“A school,” said Mark.

“A what?” asked Bill.

“A school of porpoises,” said Mark. “School, collective noun. Like flock of sheep.”

“Herd of pigs,” said Cate.

“Pride of lions.”

“Aren’t they dolphins?” asked Liz.

“One or the other,” said Tom. “I don’t think it matters.”

“Why not a pack of porpoises?” asked Bill, “or a drove of dolphins?”

“They are close to the shore, aren’t they?” said Cate.

“The sea floor must shelve quickly away from the shore here,” said Tom approaching the water’s edge. Fifty yards further on they disturbed the White Headed Pigeon from its perch in another fig tree. This time it flew away up the coast and out of their sight. They did not see it again.

After another fifteen minutes of rock hopping along the shore they came to the north western end of the island. They halted then and gazed east towards the narrows between Fame Mountain and Soldiers Point where the waters flowed in from the sea.

“That’s where we’ll be going tomorrow,” said Mark

“There is a lot of haze, isn’t there?” said Liz.

“It’s the sea breeze bringing the moisture in,” said Tom.

“What’s that land in the middle?”

“It’s Boondaba Island. It sits right in the middle of the narrows.”

“Let’s come back after sunset and see what lights are flashing,” said Mark.

“And we can signal to each other with the torches,” said Cate.

“We’ve been practising our Morse like billy-oh.”

“That’s a good idea, Cate.”

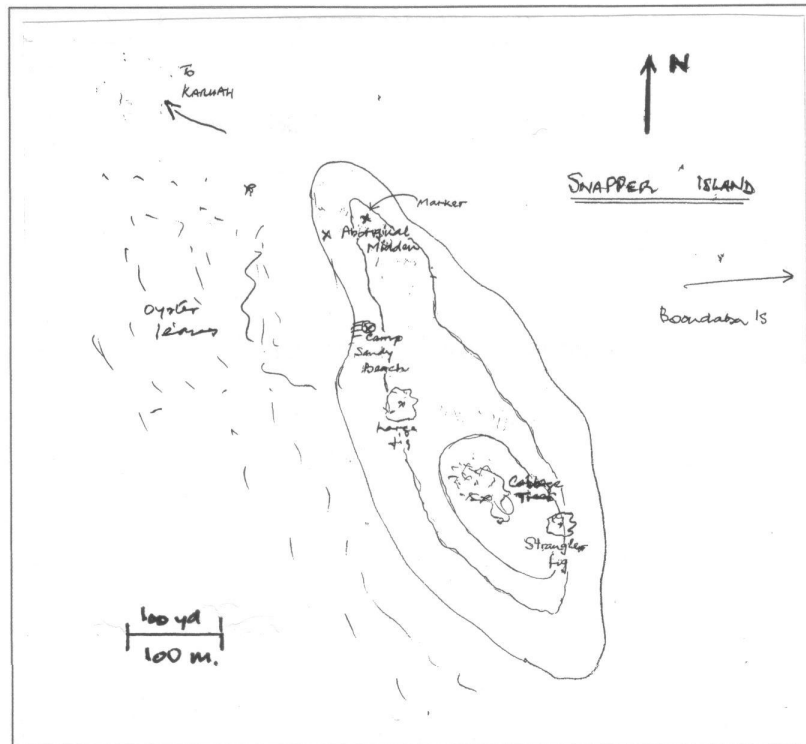
“I’m afraid my Morse is not that good,” said Liz. “In fact it’s almost non existent.”

“Never mind,” said Cate. “You can come with me.”

“There is the pole we sailed around when we came in,” said Bill pointing behind them to the west. The falling tide had exposed the extensive oyster lease and the pole which marked its north eastern corner stood well above water level. They began to walk around the point back towards where the boats and their camp were. They were out of the wind now.

“There are a lot of shells here,” said Cate as they crossed a small patch of sand. Sea shells in great profusion stretched up into the rough grass which grew at the margin of the sandy shore. Tom meanwhile was looking closely at the sand.

“This is still wet and the tide has been off this sand for three hours or more. I reckon it is a fresh water soak.”



“Maybe it is an old aboriginal midden,” said Mark.

“That would make sense,” said Tom. “Especially if they could get access to fresh water here.” They stood and gazed at the spot thinking of the original inhabitants of the area squatting around their small fire here just behind the point of the island feasting on shell fish or fish they had caught, their log boats drawn up here or just along the shore in the place where their own boats were.

“They are all gone now,” said Liz expressing their thoughts poignantly. “It must have been a lovely simple life.”

“And what a place to live.”



Bill's voice coming from the scrub above the shore disturbed their reverie. "Hi! Tom, Mark, come and have a look at this."

"What's that boy found now?" said Cate. They pushed up through the bushes and soon came upon another large fig tree.

"Round the back, here!" called Bill as they approached. They stepped over the projecting buttresses of the tree and rounded the trunk to find Bill standing beneath a small multicoloured parachute-like device hanging from a branch of the tree.

"Is it a parachute?" asked Bill.

"Too small and I don't see how it could have got through the branches of the tree," said Tom.

"No. It's tied on," said Cate. "Look at the branch above." They looked and saw that the device had been secured to the branch above.

"Hm. With a clove hitch too," said Mark. "It's obviously a marker of some sort."

"Designed to be seen," said Tom.

"But why?" asked Cate.

"Look down here," said Liz, "on the ground beneath it." There, half hidden by leaves fallen from the tree, was a large flat stone with the letter N painted on it.

"N?" said Cate.

The four elder children looked at each other questioningly.

"A mystery," said Liz at last. "What fun. A mystery to add to your adventure, Cate!"

They saw one more curiosity before they returned to the camp. "What is that bird, Tom" asked Bill pointing to the shore's edge. A small sharp billed bird was sitting on one of the rocks.

"It looks like a kingfisher," said Cate.

"It's larger than a Sacred. The colours are about the same but it's larger. A Mangrove Kingfisher I think. We'll check the book when we get back." The bird flew quickly away to roost in the forest canopy.

Another five minutes walk brought them back to their camp again.

"Circumnavigation complete," said Cate.

"Circumambulation is more like it," said Mark.

“Or circumsaltation, if that’s the right word for jumping around in a circle,” said Liz.

“No goats,” said Bill.

“No. Not a one in sight,” said Tom. The fire had burned low and was smouldering.

“Well, we have the only bit of decent beach on the island,” said Mark.

“Come on,” said Cate. “Let’s get dinner.”

“I’m starving,” said Bill.

“Well, see if you can get that fire going again.”

