

CHAPTER 8

Corrie Island

The wind now grew very light. Notwithstanding that it was long past the time for the turn of the tide they discovered from an inspection of each of the channel markers they passed that the water was in fact flowing *out* of the river and against their direction of travel. The time was about a quarter past two. They looked across at the southern shore to Corrie Island twenty yards away.

"It's very mangrovey," said Liz.

"And muddy," said Bill looking at the water's edge.

"There is a break in the mangroves coming up," said Cate. "Let's pull in there. I'm starving."

"The other channel from Port Stephens will be opening up soon," said Tom.

"There it is, just beyond," said Mark as a motor boat pulled suddenly into view from their right about a hundred yards ahead and sped up River towards Tea Gardens. Just before the Port Stephens channel opened up, however, they spied a sandy beach.

"Let's pull in there," said Liz.

"And look," added Cate, "there's a camp spot just behind."

"It's ideal."

"Look's good, Tom," said Mark.

"Okay," added Tom, "it'll do." They turned the boats and came slowly up to the beach where the crews slipped over the side and brought them to a halt. They waved to the crew of the centreboarder as it came past them heading up river.

"Where are you off to?" Cate called.

"Tea Gardens," came the response.

"We're having lunch here."

They tied the boats off to mangrove trees that grew adjacent to the small beach.

"Lunch first, and then we can empty the boats out." They took the makings for lunch out of the boats and carried them up the bank to a

sandy spot which looked over the river and its junction with the Port Stephens channel.

“Let’s use the metho stove for a cup of tea,” said Cate. “It’ll take too long to light a fire and I don’t know about you but I am dying for a drink with lunch.” Bill took the stove to a flat spot and set it up while Cate got some water from one of the containers. He added methylated spirits to the small burner, set it in place in the aluminium platform and lit it. Cate filled a billy and set it on top of the stove.

“Have you put in enough water, Cate?” asked Liz.

“A pint and a half. And when it has boiled, I’ll put it on for a second.”

“Don’t forget the lid,” said Bill and she retrieved the lid from the supplies container and put it on top of the billy.

“Who’s got the cheese?”

“Who’s got the salami?”

“Peanut butter for me.”

“No. Honey.”

“Where are the dry biscuits?”

“There are some apples and oranges once we have had tea.” They settled down to eat while the billy heated on the stove. They were all feeling tired and it was good to be sitting in comfort.

“Those boats are great,” said Liz. “But they wear you out after an hour or two. Nothing like being able to lie back and stretch your legs.”

“Our second island.”

“No. The third.”

“Well—the second for camping on.”

“Hullo. I hear the billy singing.”

“Where’s the tea?”

“In the blue drum. Container with a capital T written on it.” Soon there was a spluttering as the water started to boil and overflowed the edge of the billy.

“No you don’t, Bill,” said Cate. “I’ll add the tea. You never put enough in.” Cate added a generous half handful of tea leaves to the boiling water and lifted it off the stove. Bill slipped the snuffer over the burner to extinguish it.

“Cups!” called Cate and the others ferreted in the containers. Liz collected them and worked their bases into the sandy surface so that they would not fall over when the tea was poured.

“Where’s the milk, Bill?” Bill retrieved a tube of sweetened condensed milk from the blue container and brought it over. Cate squeezed an allowance of milk into each cup, stirred the tea in the billy and poured it carefully into each cup. Liz handed the cups around to the others. Cate relit the burner and put the billy back on the stove for their second cups of tea.

“I feel a mite weary,” said Mark lying back on the sand and yawning.”

“Me too,” said Tom.

“It’s all that hard sailing.”

“And worrying about catching the tide.”

“And the reaction now that we have made it.”

“Well. We’ve still got a bit of a way to go.”

“Crossed Port Stephens, I mean.”

“Hullo. What’s this?” said Mark. To their left they could see a large luxury cruiser forging up the river from Port Stephens. Over the top of a spacious cabin was a flying bridge where two men wearing yachting caps sat gazing languidly at the scenery. In the cabin below two women were apparently preparing lunch.

“Gin Palace,” said Cate sipping her tea. “That’s what Daddy calls them. They take up half the river.” The cruiser was dragging a steep quarter wave behind it.

“They don’t seem very excited by the glorious surroundings, do they?” said Liz.

“They are probably treating it like a driving holiday,” said Tom.

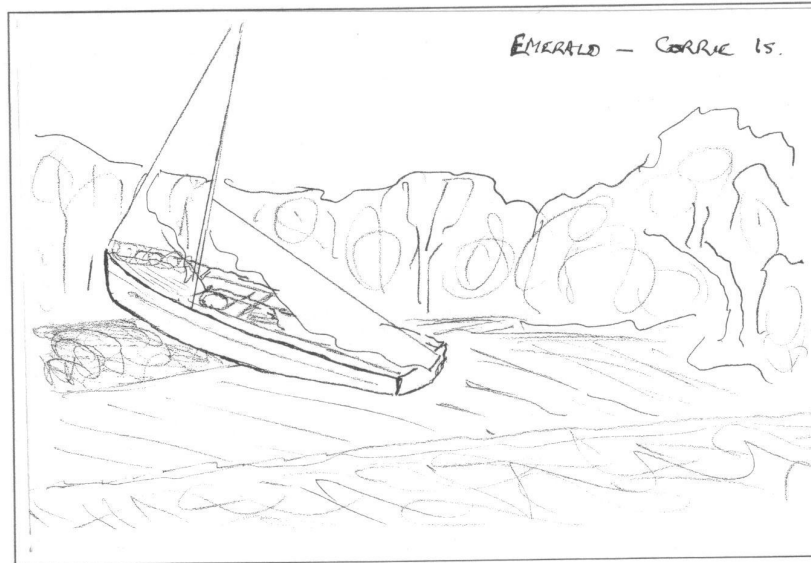
“Someone ought to tell those people how to manage their boats,” said Cate looking at the stern of the boat which was now disappearing up the River.

“They think they are driving the family car.” Tom and Mark rose instinctively to attend the two boats as the steep wash surged towards the shore. The others joined them to steady the boats until the disturbance had subsided.

“Let’s haul the boats well up,” said Mark.

“First we had better get the gear out.” They lifted the remainder of the gear and the containers they had not yet removed from the boats and carried them up the shore. Then using the rollers they hauled each boat in turn above the high water mark.

“This shore is a bit steeper than Snapper Island, isn’t it?” said Liz as she strained with Cate at the back of *Sapphire*.”



“Tom, help me roll *Sapphire* over so I can have a look at the centre board to see if there is any damage caused by that rock off Snapper Island.” Tom and Mark rolled the boat up onto its side and, while Tom held it there, Mark let the centreboard slide down on its pennant so it swung out horizontally from the bottom of the boat. He then inspected the surface carefully.

“There’s a slight dent,” he said, rubbing the surface of the leading edge. “I’m glad it’s nothing worse.” He drew the centreboard back into its case and he and Tom then returned the boat to its normal attitude.

“Hullo. The winds gone sou’east,” said Tom.

“And freshened a bit, too.” The wind was now blowing down the river towards them.

Meanwhile the two girls had been inspecting the ground for a camp site.

“There’s a spot over here where we could pitch both tents,” said Cate indicating the place to Mark and Tom. The grassy patch was behind some shrubs and provided a measure of privacy from passing vessels. The five inspected it and decided to pitch their tents there.

“When can I explore?” asked Bill.

“What about trying for some fish, Bill?” said Tom. There are bound to be some coming up river with this tide. We’ll pitch the tents and you can catch dinner.”

“All right. I’ll explore later.” Bill got his fishing gear out and headed down to a nearby rock to try his luck.

An hour or so later they had set up the tents and established themselves at their new campsite.

“What about a fire, Tom?” asked Mark.

“There’s no wood around, is there?”

“We could push through to those trees and see what we could find.”

“We have got plenty of fuel. Why don’t we use the stoves?”

“Yes. We will only be out one more night at the most.”

“What’s the time, Cate?” asked Liz.

“Going on for five o’clock.”

“We might as well get dinner ready.”

“Hullo. Here’s Bill. Any luck?”

“Yes. One bream,” said Bill with a grin holding it for them to see as he came into the camp. “There’s more there but I couldn’t catch them.”

“A good size too, Bill,” said Mark.

“Have you gutted it yet?”

“No. I’m going to do it now.”

“Well don’t do it here. Go back to the channel.”

“Okay. Has anyone got the sharp knife?” asked Bill.

“Yes. It’s here,” Liz responded handing it to him. Bill hurried back to the channel with his fish.

“Now. What will we have for dinner?” asked Liz.

“Tinned fish for us,” said Cate. “Bill will be having his fresh.”

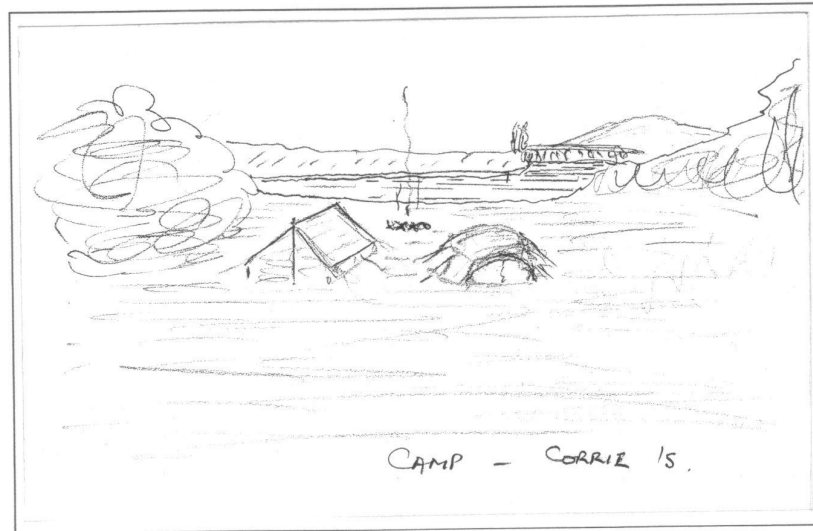
“Well. Here we are; established once again,” said Cate about half an hour later as she took her plate and sat down.

“Tents up and everything where you can find it,” said Liz.

“Bother these sand flies,” said Bill brushing them away.

“They don’t seem to take any notice of the insect repellent, do they?” said Tom.

“Just be thankful the sou’ easter is still blowing or they’d be utterly impossible,” said Mark.



“Who’s got the pepper,” asked Cate.

“Bill has,” said Liz. “Here. Pass it over, Bill.”

“More rice for anybody?” asked Liz.

“Not for me,” said Mark.

“Yes, please,” answered Bill.

“Cate. This curried fish is delicious,” said Liz.

“Even if it is out of tin,” said Mark.

“*This* fish is delicious,” said Bill with a mischievous grin.

“Are we going for a walk after dinner?”

“Yes. Let’s go along the shore towards Port Stephens.”
“The scrub on the island doesn’t invite exploration, does it?”
“Pretty thick.”

After dinner and washing up they walked over to the boats to check they were secure then headed off down the channel towards Port Stephens. The sun was now low in the sky. Two small boats with fishermen in them were anchored off a small reef in mid-channel. They walked on to the south towards the port. There were small beaches interspersed with bushy sections through which there was usually a track. Eventually the bush gave way to an open beach and they found nothing but sand between them and the water of the port at the south western point of the island.

“Look at the waders on the spit,” said Bill.
“Terns, Seagulls and a couple of Oystercatchers,” said Cate.
“Dash it,” said Tom, “I should have brought the field glasses.”
“Never mind,” said Liz.” Faintly over the breeze came a long drawn out call, a descending piping.
“I think that’s a Whimbrel calling,” said Tom.
“What a plaintive call,” said Liz.
“Yes,” said Tom pointing. “There it is. At the far end of the spit.”
They stopped to look at the group of waders feeding at the water’s edge. A large bird with a slightly downturned bill was probing the edge of the sands near the water.
“There’s plenty of food for them at low tide.”

“Look. The light from Tomaree, the southern headland, is visible,” said Tom pointing to the east. “Let’s count the seconds.” They paused to check the shining and occulting phases of the light.
“Look inland,” said Mark. “There are the leading lights for boats entering the port.” North west of them there were two pylons set up on the island one behind, and higher than, the other. A light shone from each of them.
“Boats coming into port have to line up one light over the other to ensure they are on course.”
“What happens if they don’t?”

“They run aground.” They walked on to the edge of the shore. The breeze had changed to the east and had freshened. The sun was setting.

“Oh, it’s marvellous to be here,” said Liz breathing deeply and smiling at the others. “All that languishing at school—it was worth the waiting. What a day. A long sail up a great harbour. A camp by the riverside, and glorious scenery. Heaven must be something like this.”

“Now, it’s Yacaaba Head on the north side and—what did you say?—Tomaree Head, on the south. Have I got it right?” asked Cate.

“Right as ribstone pippin,” said Tom. A fishing boat was making its way towards the heads, its port hand light shining.

“Now Bill,” said Tom. “How soon before we lose sight of the red?”

“What do you mean?” asked Bill. “I thought they shone all the time.”

“Port and starboard lights show from dead ahead to two points abaft the beam.”

“So that’s twenty two and a half degrees past where?”

“Take a point at right angles to the boat’s direction,” said Mark drawing a quick sketch on the sand, “and go around to two points aft. That’s where the light will cut out.” They watched the fishing boat as it worked determinedly through the slight swell, its motor throbbing faintly.

“There must be plenty of fish to catch off shore.” In the half light they could see a cloud of seagulls flocking around the stern of the boat as it made its way towards the heads. Its port hand light suddenly winked two or three times and disappeared from sight.

“Gone,” said Bill.

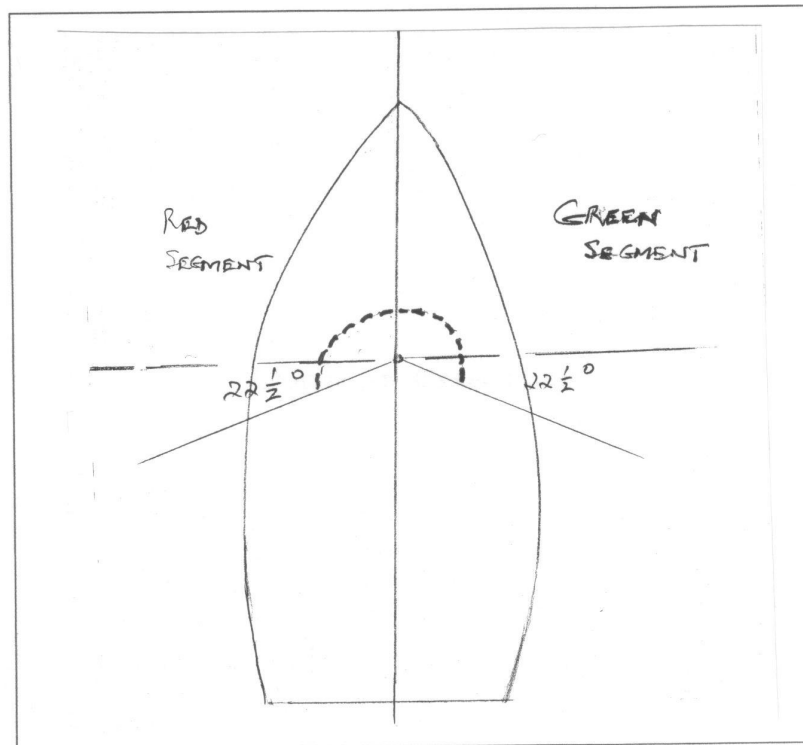
They sat on by the seaside, content to watch the scene under the fading light. A lone sea bird worked along the shore lifting and dropping on pointed wings, its head down. Now and then it would swoop towards the sea but pull back to its previous station.

“Tern,” said Tom. “Probably a Common Tern.”

“Look, there he goes.” The tern dropped into the sea like a stone this time to appear ten seconds later and fly out of the water shaking its body to disperse the water from its wings.

“What a way to get your dinner,” said Cate.

“He’s having fish, same as us,” said Bill.



Lights began to show along the southern shore. There was a sharp *peep-peep-peep-peep-peep* from a bird echoing across the water.

“What’s that one, Tom?”

“Sounds like an Oystercatcher.”

“There he is.” A dark shape flew directly overhead from the water heading inland over the island.

“There’s nothing vague about their flight, is there.

“Not like gulls.”

“They know where they are going.”

“Look there, up the harbour.” Cate pointed to the west. “What’s that flashing light?”

“That must be off Boondaba Island,” said Mark.

“The *other* side of it,” said Tom. “At 8 o’clock last night we were on the western side of it when we looked east from Snapper Island.” They thought back to the view across the dark water as the waves splashed at their feet on Snapper Island’s rocky shore.

“And our mystery sailor in his boat,” said Liz voicing their unspoken thoughts.

“You haven’t seen him today, Bill,” said Mark.

“And I’ve been keeping a good lookout, too!”

Some time later they began to make their way back towards the camp. It was getting dark and they had to use their torches now. After crossing the beach they found the track again. Where the track left the beach and wandered through the scrub they had to watch that they didn’t trip over hidden tree roots.

“What’s that Tom?” asked Cate suddenly pointing into the bushes to their left. “Something is shining.” Tom and Mark shone their torches in the direction indicated. Something orange shone back at them from about fifty yards away.

“Isn’t it another of those markers?” said Mark.

“I think you’re right.”

“Let’s go and see.” They pushed into the bushes.

“This scrub is pretty thick.”

“We’ll just take it slowly.” Mark led and they pushed their way slowly through the scrub after him as he headed towards the orange marker.

“Well. It’s another one all right,” said Liz as they came up to it. The parachute-like marker hung from a branch of a small tree.

“Doesn’t it stand out when you shine a torch on it.”

“Like a neon sign.”

“Look below it,” said Cate, “and see if there is another letter.”

“Yes, there’s an S,” said Bill shining his torch. “It’s an S, isn’t it? Not a 5.” They all came up and looked down at the letter reflected in their torch light. It was painted on a flat rock cemented to the ground beneath the marker.

“It’s an S,” said Mark.
“So we’ve got an N, a 5 and an S,” said Cate.
“What does it all mean?” asked Liz.
“I suppose we’ll find out in due course,” said Tom.
“Who cares,” said Cate. “It’s just a bit of mystery to add to our adventure.”

They headed back towards the shore and emerged from the scrub onto a beach from where they could see towards the entrance to the channel from the river.

“The tide has not long turned,” said Tom. “Look. That fishing boat is pointing upstream now.”

“It should have turned half an hour ago, shouldn’t it?” said Mark.

“Dad warned us that the tides here weren’t always precise in their movements,” said Tom.”

“Hey, isn’t that the sailing surf boat?” Mark called suddenly.

“Where?”

“There, going across the entrance to the channel.” Faintly, in what was left of the light, they could see the sailing boat they had seen the previous evening breasting the first of the ebb as it headed towards Tea Gardens.

“Ave atque vale,” said Liz.

“Someone signal him,” said Cate.

“Too late,” said Tom. “He’s almost gone.” Even as they spoke the boat was passing from their view.

“Where do you suppose he is heading?” asked Cate.

“Tea Gardens?”

“He’s got no navigation lights showing,” said Mark.

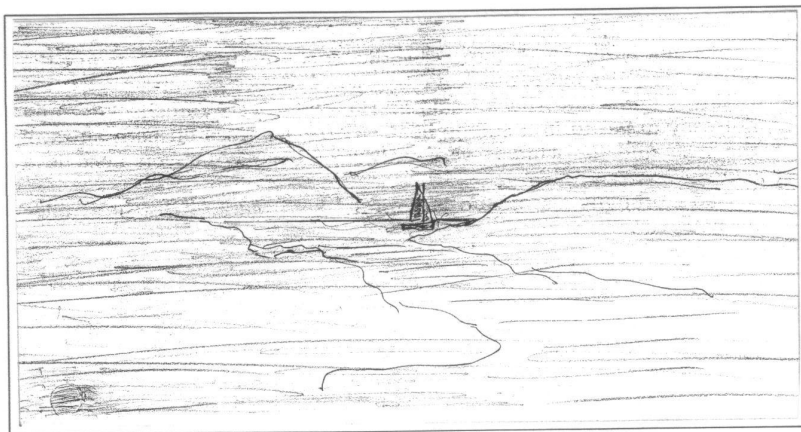
“And he’s got the ebb against him,” added Tom.

By the time they had returned to the point ten minutes later and gazed up-river in the gathering darkness there was no trace of the mystery boat.

“Let’s get ready for bed,” said Cate. “It’s been a big day.”

“I’ll say it has.”

“I can hardly keep my eyes open.”



“Don’t forget to clean your teeth, Bill,” said Cate as she headed for the tents.

“Let’s do a final check on the boats, Tom,” said Mark. The two went over to the boats and to check that they were secure.

“Nothing is going to blow away.”

“There’s not much wind now, in any event.”

“I wonder if that easterly will persist tomorrow?”

“It will help us up the river if it does.” They joined the others in the tents. Before they went to sleep Tom and Mark discussed the program for the morrow.

“High tide in the morning is—when?”

“About 6.15. Maybe a bit later. It doesn’t seem to follow the rules in the river.”

“So low about 6 hours later. A bit after midday.”

“We could get going before the ebb finishes, especially if there is a bit of wind. Say, a bit after eleven.”

“We have to phone Bombah Point at Tea Gardens. That shouldn’t take long.”

“And then catch the bulk of the tide upriver.”

“Goodnight all,” called Cate.

“Goodnight girls. Sleep tight.”

“Goodnight.”

“Cate, it feels like I am still afloat,” said Liz as she lay back on her sleeping mat. “It’s the most delicious feeling.”
“You won’t need any rocking. Neither will I,” said Cate yawning.
“What a marvellous day. Haven’t we been lucky?”
“So what do all those markers mean?”
“What were they? An N, an S and a 5.”
“Perhaps the Scouts are holding a jamboree and these are clues for them?”
“We haven’t seen any Scouts. Come to think of it, we haven’t seen much of anyone.”
“No. We’ve had all this water to ourselves.”
“Come on. We’d better go to sleep.” Liz rolled over on her side.
“See you in the morning.”
“Mmmm.”

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Liz could hear a man’s voice a long way away. He was saying the strangest things—*Alfa Echo Juliet—Do you copy?* She turned the message over in her head but could make nothing of it. Who was this Juliet? And why was he asking her to copy? *What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.* No. That was Juliet talking to Romeo. This was someone talking to Juliet.

*How shall I round the ending of a story,
Now the wind’s falling and the Harbour nears?
How shall I sign your tiny Book of Glory?
Juliet, my Juliet, after many years.*

No. That was Hilaire Belloc writing in an autograph book. And what was she to copy? Liz could make nothing of it. She could hear Cate’s breathing and a faint snore from the other tent. Also small sounds coming from the river thirty yards or so away—little crackles as the ebbing tide exposed the crab holes on the river bank. Otherwise silence. Yet the voice had sounded so real. She opened her eyes. It

was dark and only the faintest of light showed through the lining of the tent.

“I must have been dreaming,” she thought and she rolled over, closed her eyes and was soon asleep again.

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A faint light was showing through the tent wall as Mark woke. He pushed his way out of his sleeping bag on his elbows and poked his head out through the door of the tent. The tide was full. A slight mist hung over the water. He put his head on his folded arms and waited for the sleepiness to disperse. He thought he could hear voices, faint but persistent. That was curious. He lifted his head. Then he heard the sound of paddles and now the voices more clearly. He pulled himself right out of his sleeping bag, got out of the tent and stood up in the half light. A canoe—a kayak—was coming quickly down the river. There were two figures in it paddling vigorously. The men were dressed in some sort of blue battle dress and wore blue berets. They were talking together and did not notice Mark until the canoe was quite close.

“G’day lad,” the leading paddler said. Mark raised his hand in reply. In no time at all the canoe was flashing past. As it did so Mark caught part of their conversation. The first paddler said to his companion: “We’ll get Corrie on the way back. Middle Island first, then Barramee, then Snapper ...” The sound faded and he didn’t hear the rest. Mark watched them out of sight. They were paddling hard and obviously on some mission.

No one else was stirring in the tents. Mark checked his watch. It was a quarter past six. “Might as well get a fire going,” he said to himself and went to look for wood. He found the boats covered in a heavy dew. There was some drift wood further along the sandy shore and he spent ten minutes collecting it before returning to the camp. The sound of breaking wood woke Bill who emerged from the tent.

“Hello,” he said, “getting a fire going?”

“How did you sleep, young Bill?”

“Very well,” he replied yawning and stretching. “Do you think I might catch something if I put a line in?”

“You might well do. Feel like fish for breakfast too, do you?” Bill grinned and having retrieved his fishing tackle he headed for the beach. Tom emerged from the tent shortly after.

“Boy! Did I sleep,” he said.

“You missed a bit of action.”

“What?”

“Some military paddlers going hell for leather down the river.” Mark described them.

“Blue berets? Maybe Navy personnel,” said Tom still a bit husky from sleep.

The girls were stirring in their tent and shortly after Cate emerged.

“What’s this I hear?” she asked. Mark repeated his story.

“Could this explain the markers?” asked Liz as she joined the others.

“Where is Middle Island?”

“That’s the other name for Boondaba,” said Tom. The one we were on yesterday.”

“Where we found the 5,” said Mark.

“What about Barramee?”

“Here it is,” said Tom who had retrieved the map from the tent. “*Baromee Hill*.” The others gathered around him.

“Look. It’s on the western side of North Arm Cove right in the middle of Burley Griffin’s proposed plan for the National Capital.”

“Is this the solution, then, to all those clues? What do you think, Tom?”

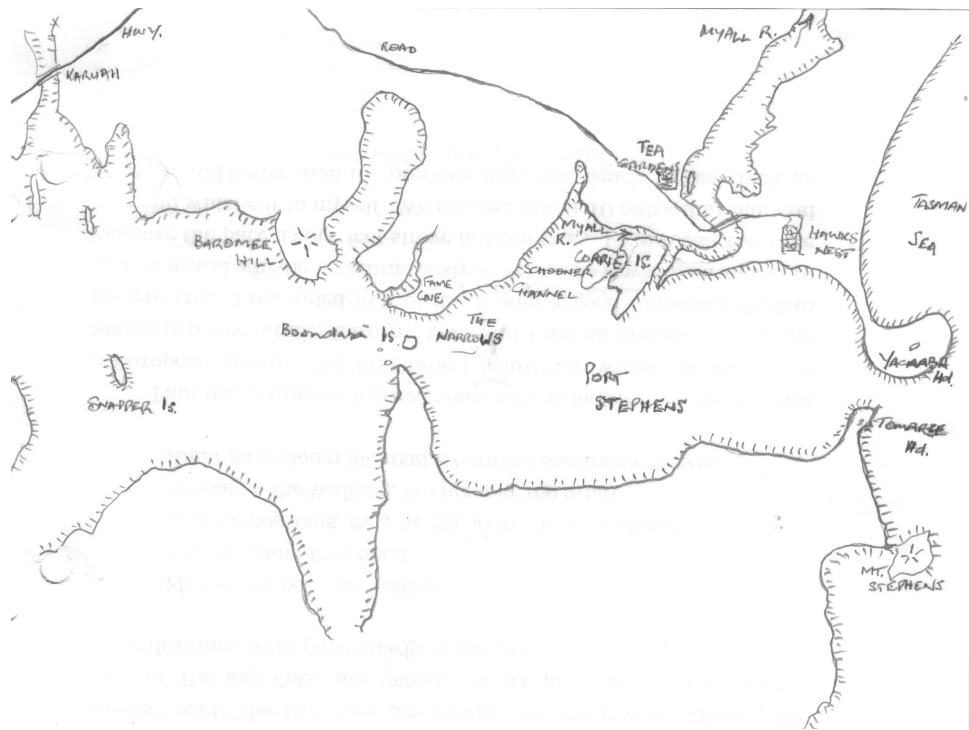
“It looks like some sort of competition, doesn’t it?”

“Between whom?” asked Liz.

“They were Navy or Army types I saw.”

“So, they’ll have to climb up Baromee Hill after visiting Boondaba,” said Cate. “Then get into the canoe and paddle over to Snapper.”

“Sooner than me,” said Liz. “They’ll be exhausted.”



“We’ll keep a lookout for other canoeists. If it’s a competition there’s bound to be lots of them around.”

“Well, we’re ahead of them all at this stage,” said Cate. “We’ve got two letters and a number.”

“We won’t be for long. They’ll be chasing clues all day.”

“And we don’t know what the marker is on Baromeer Hill.”

“And even if we did know, it wouldn’t help us much because we don’t know what the object of it all is,” said Mark.

Bill returned in high excitement some minutes later with four bream, all of them larger than the one he had caught the previous afternoon. They told him of what Mark had seen and heard.

“Why didn’t you tell me when I got up, Mark?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt your efforts to get us some fish for breakfast,” he replied with a grin.

“It’s a pity we didn’t bring the larger frying pan after all,” said Cate, as she and Liz later struggled in relays to cook the filets of bream . There was plenty for them all. The fire had settled from a fine blaze into a glowing heap of coals and Tom and Mark used the remainder of the bread to make a large pile of toast.

“Next time, we’ll put more trust in Bill’s ability to feed the party,” said Mark.

They found that they all had hearty appetites and thoroughly enjoyed this fresh fish breakfast washed down with cups of strong tea.

After this they spent a lazy morning waiting for the tide to turn. All were feeling somewhat weary from the efforts of the last two days and were glad to have time to relax. The breeze was steady from the south east and promised a good run up the river. Tom called the others to action at about 10.00 am.

“The ebb will be easing shortly. We want to get away well before low water. Time to get organised.”

They lowered and folded the tents, packed the gear and got ready for the next part of their trip—up the river to the Broadwater.