

CHAPTER 19

Tea in Tea Gardens

“How do you take your tea, Vice Admiral?” Eleanor Parfitt was in her element. She knew the irascible Vice Admiral Pearson from numerous garden parties at Government House. On those occasions she, too, would have been waited on but the situation here was different.

It was a week after the events recorded above. Representatives of each of the three Services had gathered in the Lounge of the Grosvenor Hotel, Tea Gardens. The members of the three competing teams were present in their best uniforms, boots shining. The Defence Force chiefs had insisted on the small function. It served to provide a formal conclusion to the competition in place of the intended concluding ceremony which they had had to abandon with the disappearance of the prize.

Mrs Parfitt had listened wide eyed as her husband had informed her of full scope of the activities of Mark and Elisabeth with the Ryan children, Thomas, Catherine and William, and had been secretly proud that, with nothing more than with a couple of sailing boats and James’s leaky old canoe, they had managed to outwit competitors from the Navy, Army and Air Force. She brought his cup of tea to the Vice Admiral who was now chatting amiably with Father Hannan. The priest had been a Navy chaplain many years earlier and they had a number of acquaintances in common.

“White and two sugars,” she said with a smile.

“Thank you, Eleanor.”

“What about you, Father John? Black and one sugar?”

“Eleanor, that’s very kind of you, thank you.” She went back to the tea table while they continued their discussion. There was no doubt about this eccentric priest, she thought. He was even dressed like a priest today, wearing collar and black fustian and turned out just as smartly as the defence force officers. He might have formal views about religion, she thought, but he had more charm and much more knowledge than the majority of the sophisticates who peopled her social life. Yet he was seemingly quite happy to spend weeks in the wild consorting with her two uncontrollable children.

The thing was puzzling, beyond her comprehension. But all that mattered for the moment was that there was something other than the demands of society life which had compelled the heads of the three Services to this tea party. And her family was intimately involved in it.

James, her husband, was talking to Air Marshall Nugent in company with David Templeton Q.C. who had taken the day off from his busy practice in Sydney for some reason. She had heard from James that he was a Naval Reserve officer and supposed that he was interested in the results of the competition. Patrick Ryan was speaking with the four soldiers whose party had come close to pipping the children for the treasure. Mark and Thomas were with the Navy team and Elisabeth and Catherine were holding the Air Force members enthralled with their description of surviving the thunderstorm in their sailing boats on the Myall River.

“We should have cross examined Tom and Bill when we had them in the canoe up the Myall River,” said one of the soldiers.

“Yes. They were rather pleased you were too busy to enquire about their intentions,” their father responded.

“It might have moved us to work a bit harder at the clues if we had known that we were competing against three other teams rather than two.”

“Especially one with a bunch of experts like these kids.”

“Well, I gather they got a bit of a head start on you, finding the first clue on Snapper Island.”

“You’ve no idea how long that one took,” said one of them. “Mick and I spent the best part of an hour chasing over that island. And Mick needed medical attention when he walked into one of those stinging trees.”

“They told me about those *Gympie-Gympies*.”

“Is that what they are called?”

“They were ahead of you there. Last year they were playing among them up on the Queensland border.”

“Every time Mick dipped his hand into the water on the way back he howled.”

“Yeah,” said Mick. “They warned us about the ticks and the sandflies. But not about the most dangerous things of all, the ruddy trees.”

“It beats me how Mark kept the boat on its feet with all that sail,” said one of airmen to the girls. “We were in enough trouble with the storm on the land. And when we got into the canoe I thought we would be swamped.”

“When the boat is planing, there’s less tendency to capsize,” said Liz. “It’s quite stable.”

“Jim said he thought we should have gone back to help. Then he told me he saw you pull in to the bank. So you were obviously weren’t going to drown.”

“Then there were your mates in the other boat.”

“We want to thank you for dropping the list of controls,” said Liz.

“Ah. That was Jim again.” Jim, who was standing beside him, blushed crimson and covered his face with his hands.

“I’ll never live it down. It came out of my pocket with the hankie.”

“Without it we would never have had a show.”

“No. It’s really the Navy we have to thank,” said Cate looking round discretely. “If they hadn’t sent all that Morse we wouldn’t be talking to you now.”

“Yes. That was very tricky on their part, using Morse,” said another of the airmen with some feeling.

“Not that it did them much good.”

“Against the spirit of the competition, that was.”

“Well. You’ll just have to learn it. It’s not hard,” said Cate.

“Don’t you believe her,” said Liz. “If Mark and Tom hadn’t been around to read the messages we wouldn’t have had a chance.”

“Did you find it difficult to get out to the islands?” Mark asked the sailors.

“No. We were using an ocean going canoe. You have to be able to right it if it capsizes so it’s a bit more stable than an inland waters canoe.”

“Did you travel by night?”

“Well. Bert and I did it by day, although some of the crews did it at night.”

“Tom,” said Mark. “We must get one of those. Fancy travelling the seas in a canoe?”

“I think I’d prefer to have a bit more freeboard and a lot more stability.”

“And did you sleep on any of the islands?”

“We slept on Broughton and a pretty rough night, it was too. Those pilots from Williamtown kept us awake. We wished they had chosen another night to fly those Hercules around.”

“That was the night Mark sailed down to get the control in the saddle on Lake Boolambayte.”

“The following morning we had to paddle back to Port Stephens. It would have been impossible for the canoe to survive in the surf anywhere along that beach.”

“I think I would have launched through the surf,” said Mark reflectively. “Carried over the sand from the Broadwater, put it in and headed out through the break until the canoe got clear.”

“That’s a thought,” said another of the sailors to his mates. “Why didn’t we think of that?”

“And we wouldn’t have had to paddle out and back from Port Stephens.”

“We might save that idea up for next year.”

“We can’t understand how you didn’t manage to beat the Army when you had the advantage of Morse,” said Tom.

“Pete and Bill still had to get the controls on Myall Lake when they got our Morse from Broughton. And they had missed the one at the shack. Couldn’t find it anywhere.”

“It was on the back wall. An O about ten feet high.”

“So we heard from the Army guys. It was pitch black when we were there and we missed it. Well, by the time we had worked out that the site could only be on Johnson’s Hill it was 9 o’clock and we were about an hour too late.” Tom resisted the impulse to tell him they had been more than two hours too late.

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“Well. It falls to me as the senior member of the Senior Service,” said Vice Admiral Pearson to the assembled gathering ten minutes later, “to call this small celebration to order. In other circumstances it might have been an occasion for acrimony, seeing the carefully laid plans of six months preparation scuttled, as it were. But in the Forces we never stop learning in order that we may profit by our mistakes. And after initial misgivings and annoyance at the unexpected outcome we have realised that it has brought certain compensations for us all.

“I want to congratulate the teams from each of the Services for their efforts and dedication to a competition which I anticipate will flourish in the years to come. It is inevitable that there will be teething problems in the first year. Though the nature of those teething problems,” he turned his eyes on the assembled Ryan and Parfitt children, “we did not quite anticipate.

“There will be another competition next year and certain alterations to the rules. Air Marshall Nugent, Lieutenant General Ware-Smith and I have had certain informal discussions. We have thought we might ban Morse altogether. But perhaps the better course would be for us to insist that you all learn it. It seems that we have wasted a valuable resource by removing it from the Services’ curricula. The Navy team profited by it and, except for a bit of a hiccup, might have taken the Cup this year. But the rules should be fair and not favour one of the Services over another.

“It would be churlish to belittle the efforts made by this band of enthusiastic and intelligent young people who pipped us at the post. It is of such as these that the Services may expect to draw their members in the years to come. Speaking for myself I hope that the spirit of adventure which they have shown flourishes among the young. Only good can come of it. The nation needs members who are prepared to engage in struggle to achieve something.

“They have done us the courtesy of returning to us the gold key which was the prize of the competition. It will be the prize again next year. The Joint Chiefs of Staff of the three Services have agreed that we should signal the success of these young adventurers with a small award. The success of these young people centres around their two sailing boats *Emerald* and *Sapphire* whose names, I am told incidentally, derive from some events which occurred in southern Queensland last year involving the recovery of some lost jewels. We have had made two badges featuring the crests of each of the Services for securing to each of the two boats to mark their involvement in the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gold Cup. We hope that the two boats will carry them with pride.” Vice Admiral Pearson then invited Tom and Mark to come forward to receive the badges but after a short discussion they pushed

Liz and Cate forward and the two girls accepted the gifts. For once Cate was tongue tied and so Liz responded.

“We want to thank the combined Services for making this the very best of holidays for us. We had not the slightest idea of such an adventure when we embarked after weeks of schoolwork from Karuah almost two weeks ago. We are sorry we took your prize but we hope you won’t mind—especially now that we have returned it to you,” she grinned producing a wave of laughter from the assembly. “I can’t speak for our parents, but you have made five young people very happy. I think I can say these badges will be worn with great pride”—she looked towards Tom and Mark for affirmation—“on *Emerald* and on *Sapphire* in all our future adventures. Thank you from all of us.” She returned to her seat to loud applause from the hardened servicemen who had quite warmed to the five. They had embarked for this small ceremony in the early morning with some misgivings but now found they were enjoying themselves immensely.

Vice Admiral Pearson resumed. “We have also had made a replica—gold plated—of the key they purloined from us so outrageously! Who is going to accept this?” By immediate agreement among the four elder children, Bill was pushed forward and accepted the key from the Vice Admiral with thanks. “I am informed that Bill is really the brains behind this outfit,” he continued. “It was he who divined that the bearing was sou’ sou’ west from the final control and not just sou’ west. How about a round of applause?” The assembly proceeded to give him one and Bill returned to his place red faced.

“Well. That’s the end of the formalities. We are to go in to lunch now and after that all those who are game have been promised a couple of hours sailing on Port Stephens with Mark and Liz, with Thomas, Cate and Bill and with Father Jack Hannan in their boats. The Navy has made available three of its twenty footers also. James and David, you will be there I hope? And Patrick? And Mary, and Eleanor too?” Mrs Parfitt looked self conscious but when Mary Ryan had put up her hand to indicate her attendance at the sailing party she had felt it incumbent on her to do the same. Liz turned a quizzical look upon her father who responded with a grin.

“Good for you. The boats are drawn up on Jimmy’s beach on Port Stephens and as soon as we have finished lunch, we will be driving across the Hawks Nest bridge and heading down to the water.”

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As Liz said to Cate, it really was the best way to complete the very best of holidays—sailing in company with their parents and all the Service crews with a brisk nor’easter blowing under a cloudless sky on glorious Port Stephens; racing each other down to Boondaba Island and back; and dodging the porpoises which were attracted by the cavalcade of boats. Just a little bit of heaven. How on earth would they ever improve on it?

The End

