

The Outplacement Consultant

Chapter One



Matt Trevenen, head boy at Goonwindi High School this year past is just back from a walking tour to New Zealand. He's not all that mad on Kiwi Land, but he is surely sweet on the head girl participant in this same trip. He's been well rewarded for his interest in her and he now is at crunch point in deciding what to do next.

There's room for him on the big property the family owns at Goonwindi. His dad is thinking of bringing Matt into the working team

and perhaps retiring to his wooden Queenslander on the river at Newfarm.

Matt is nobody's fool. He has been observing his three hard-bitten elder brothers as they go about their farming career. Just at the moment, two of them are flat tack clearing acres and acres of Brigalow. Their Member of Parliament has warned them a moratorium on this is coming up; thus they are working long days with their bulldozers knocking over as much as they can. Two are married. Married locals; girls without much polish, but who, on their family history, will be stickers. The third is taking out a tall blonde school teacher; not a sticker Matt thinks. She's sure to decamp a bit down the track and take at least half of her intended's farm share with her. Marrying a local if you're on the land is essential Matt thinks, but they can get pretty hard-faced and sun scorched as time goes by.

Thus he's engineering little mishaps that point to his being unsuitable to be a farmer. He's a good hand with stock and horses; a natural. However, he works at little mechanical mishaps; running the farm bike out of fuel 8 miles from the homestead, bogging the tractor he's on, generally indicating his ineptitude at what should be natural farm skills. It pays off when his Dad comes around the verandah where he is sitting reading the Brisbane Courier Mail.

"Matt," he says, "Mum and I think it may be best if you have a shot at University, but to be honest, we don't know what field you should study."

"Oh," Matt says, "Bachelor of Arts would be fine."

"That's a nothing degree," Dad says.

"Good enough to go teaching with," Matt says, "at least on English and History and these days it can be fitted in with a Commerce Minor."

A few weeks later, Matt is living in the old ground floor servant's quarters at the elevated family house. They have a decent size fibreglass cruiser moored to their pontoon and Matt goes up to university on this on Fridays; other days on the City Catamaran Service which docks just along a bit at Newfarm. Early on at University, Matt looks hard at what interests he can follow. He's not a great team sport fan and individual sports like golf, while an option, is quite costly and Matt is not so flush at this time, having spent on his walking trip to New Zealand. Matt settles on boxing.

Almost no outlay for this sport as the instructor, Jack Marks, for reasons of his own, trains the boxers for no charge. Matt is supple, but strong and has width and

strength in his shoulders. He is not a drinker and is rapier quick and after a few sessions in the University gym, Jack says, "Just hold back a while, Matt." Matt does.

"You're not bad at this," Jack says. "How are you off, financially?"

"Not flush," says Matt.

"Hmm," says Jack. "Here's my card. Come down to Sammy's Gym at the Valley 4pm next Thursday and I'll take the first steps to get you an income."

"Doing what?" Matt asks. Jack chuckles.

"Let's give you a few non-Queensbury lessons and we'll talk from there."

Matt fronts at the gym down at the Valley. It's a big room, huge mat on the floor. You get to it in the low rent area. You go down the Arcade where, for \$9 you can get a haircut that will cost you \$35 in Queen Street Mall. Some days the cutter is Indian, other days Vietnamese, but whatever, the cuts are top class. Whatever anyone says or thinks, Fortitude Valley is a fascinating area that attracts all walks of life in Greater Brisbane. The meals served in the Mall are very top drawer and again, a fraction of what you pay in Brisbane City. The nightclub scene is something else again and this is the area that Jack Marks is, to some extent, honing in on.

Matt is surprised to see that there are other Uni students from Jack's class along. He gives them a stubbie or a soft drink and sits them down. Jack then addresses the chaps present.

"Well," he says. "Things are metamorphing here in the Valley; our equivalent to Kings Cross. I've been put in charge of developing a new generation of crowd controllers at the night clubs. We don't want bouncers, but we want people who physically and psychologically can bounce people. The scene here has gotten a bit nasty. We get these big blokes in dinner suits, popping mainly uppers, drinking vodka neat and beating the shite out of anyone a bit troublesome. They get a bit carried away and the Fuzz arrive and things happen. Now a bit of a punch-up at the door does the nightclubs no harm, no harm at all. The patrons slurp the turps and like to see a bit of action. It's the collateral damage that is giving the scene a bad name; i.e. when the bouncers who are big strong chaps get the testosterone thing and damage the troublesome punters. Some get very, very damaged. We would like to train you lot up to stand in for these duties in an intellectual way; to do the effective, but smart thing. I can promise you, that is if you make the grade, that you will only have to work three nights a week to earn – earn in folding ones – money that is twice the national minimum wage."

This sounds good so the impoverished students fall into line and learn the tricks of the nightclub doorman's trade.

"The tendency..." Jack says, "is to wade into troublemaking with your fists. That's a no no, or only a very last resort. Fists are comprised of tissue and small carpal bones. If you smash them up, your hands are handicapped forever. Now we turn to the other end of the scale – your feet. If you know what you're doing and wear good strong English Oxfords, you can kick the crap out of the chap you're tackling without hurting yourself. Now....back to the top end of things. The very best form of assault is the head-butt. Not only is it a no risk venture, it's a move no one expects. It's best called a sudden shock. Your forehead is incredibly strong. The human head is heavy; there are a lot of muscles backing up the carriage of the head. In essence, it's like being hit with a bowling ball, a very heavy bowling ball. You can pulp noses and crack cheekbones and about the only down side to the one butting is a bit of a headache. But....the big thing is, people are watching your mitts, perhaps your feet if they're Thai boxing orientated, while the head-butt is absolutely nothing more than a very devastating surprise. There is also the knife carrier. Lots of them around since the Yanks got chequered in 'Nam. They're easy to pick. They stand back quickly,

their eyes dart around and in nano-seconds of the appropriate time, they have a blade out. So you carry a switch-blade yourself. If you think it's a knife fighter, haul this out and nothing draws a blades attention like another blade. Having got his attention, you kick the proverbial out of him with your tough English shoes and then sap him. Here is an example of a sap."

He holds up a dark leather-looking flat rod, about ten inches long.

"These are surplus," he continues, "bought from the Johannesburg Police. They're lead pellet filled and made out of rhinoceros hide. The South African chaps used them on Kaffirs. The most distracting thing to a crowd controller is the abuse from those being controlled. It's best to have a little ditty to sing as you're taking them out."

"What do you sing?" someone asks.

"Ah....," Jack replies, "I chant 'the boy stood on the burning deck (punch), his pockets full of crackers (Thai box), an errant spark hits his mark (head-butt), and blows off all his'.....well, you get the message. It's purely an aid to execution of your plan of violence. What would you sing, Matt?"

Matt, as quick as, says, "I saw that marvellous film, Miss Potter - all about Beatrix Potter of Lake Districts fame. In the scene where her fiancé; (but never husband), sings to a music box – 'Will you teach me how to dance?' Here goes – will you teach me how to dance (head-butt), will you teach me how to dance (Thai kick), will you teach me how to dance (sap him hard on the head), will you teach me how to dance (foot behind his legs, push him flat on his back), etc, etc."

Jack laughs. "Excellent," he says. "It's all about focus while you fook them up and Matt's example is a good one."

Matt takes to this abrasive and a bit dangerous job like a Mountain Duck to water and two years on, is the best crowd controller in Fortitude Valley.

Chapter Two

Matt is looking at this and that outside the nightclub he works at one balmy summer Saturday evening, when a violent altercation bobs up at the next nightclub down the strip. He is even more surprised when Leah Leong, a tall, broad-shouldered Chinese girl rushes up.

"Matt," she says, "Help, help; they're killing old Pumpwater. Quick, quick!"

He sprints after the girl and thus finds Leah's friend, quite a decent chap who plays basketball for the Uni, down on the ground and being well and truly kicked by two bouncers. Pumpwater is tall and lanky, but he's not built to absorb this type of punishment. As quick as a flash, Matt head-butts one severely and saps the other fellow with his South African sap. Matt helps Pumpwater stagger out to the street entry and flags down a cab and puts a \$50 note in the cabbie's hand.

"Tell him where you want to go, Leah," he says, "but Hospital Casualty would be my first choice."

On Monday at Uni, Leah Leong winkles Matt out.

Matthew Trevenen, I am deeply indebted to you and I'd like to cook you a slap up Chinese dinner Thursday night."

"Can't do it," Matt says, "I'm working that night."

"Well, tonight then," she says.

She comes around to Matt's that night – and doesn't leave for three years.

"What about Pumpwater?" Matt asks. She laughs a tinkly laugh.

“Oh,” she says, “he’s fooking useless and even worse, he’s useless at fooking. Let’s see how you go about it.”

She’s unusual for a Chinese girl. She’s so much taller and strong, but she is also all round capable and Matt can hardly believe his luck in picking her up. She brings with her to the Queenslander garage a beautiful blue soft-tail Harley Davidson and as Matt has no car, this becomes their transport to here and there, except one day a week when they catch the City Cat to Uni; this on the days they stop at the historic Storey Bridge Pub for a noggin and Uni feast days when Matt and Leah take the fibreglass cruiser from the pontoon upriver.

“Matt,” Leah says as she stir fries quite an interesting tea, “I’m down to sit in on an outplacement interview late tomorrow. Why don’t you come too and see one of our past University graduates strut his stuff?”

Leah is doing Psychology so this is part of her course.

“Okay,” says Matt, “I’ve got plenty of spare time between the end of my Uni day and front up time at the nightclub.”

They meet up and go into the Psychology faculty area. The late afternoon sun is slanting in through the windows. The outplacement man comes in and the chap being counselled arrives. The afternoon light sort of highlights the speaker; a tall austere looking man. The civilities observed, this chap gets on with things. The chap he’s counselling is a long time employee of one of the many Brisbane firms currently down-sizing. The end package they have given him includes a session with the head of the Economics faculty to advise him how best to handle his redundancy package and now this interview to move the victim forward in obtaining another method of earning his bread and cheese.

Matt listens closely on how the session develops. He soon arrives at the conclusion that it’s all a total waste of time. He imagines the speaker should be exploring what sort of skills the interviewee may have, to jolly him along and to narrow and then hunt down possibilities, but it’s not like that. A bit of religion, faith in god, trust in the future and so on. The outplacement consultant works in a top finance spot in Brisbane. He’s consulting for the University free of charge it seems; the fee goes to the Uni. Naturally they are glad to have a free outplacement consultant doing the dog work. The sun is beaming in on the speaker. Matt has a very hard look at him; conventional suit, restrained tie, lace-up shoes, not quite top of the range glasses frames, pursed lips. Conservatism personified Matt judges – no people skills, no warmth, worse still, his eyes are a bit darty. He, the speaker, suddenly realises he’s being closely lamped and drops his eyes to his notes. Matt transfers his attention to the chap being counselled. Not a bad bloke he surmises and probably wondering at this stage what the hell he is doing here. He catches Matt’s eye and surprisingly tips him a ghost of a wink.

The speaker looks up from his notes; he’s been through the shrink course after all, directs a sharp look at Matt and asks, “You’re doing Psychology here?”

Matt replies, “Positively not at all, I’m near the end of my Bachelor of Arts Degree, but Psychology has been briefly in my studies for that course. Leah here is studying in your discipline.”

“Well, I hope you found this interesting,” the speaker says, looking at Matt, totally ignoring everyone else, including his client.

“Very,” says Matt, “it’s important work.”

“Hold in for a minute,” the man says and ends the session. The chap being counselled makes the right noises and departs after shaking hands all round. The speaker tunnel visions in.

“This is a world away from your discipline,” he says. I’d be very interested to know why you came.” But Matt is no fool.

“I think, Sir,” he says, “that the thrust of being at university is to provide a wide education. Thus, this meeting is part of that widening process. It’s part of my learning.”

The speaker has picked up on Matt’s cynicism of the afternoon’s session and is both suspicious and perceptive. Yet underneath it all, Matt reckons this cold fish probably inflicts marriage counselling on his poor wife. *‘Show me someone going to marriage counselling,’ Matt thinks, ‘and I’ll show you someone or some couple that doesn’t get on in bed.’* Matt and Leah walk over the Brisbane River footbridge to pick up the City Cat.

“A quick recovery, Matt,” Leah says. “Do you believe what you said?”

Matt chuckles. “That bastard,” he says, “was only here to feather his own nest. There wasn’t a spark of empathy with the chap he was supposed to be helping.”

They reach the City Cat pick-up ramp. The victim of the session is standing comfortably there on the dock; he’s smoking a very small briar pipe. Matt grins.

“Did you miss the last one?” he asks. (the service is regular at this time of day despite the up-river site of the university)

“No,” he surprisingly says, “I waited for you. I didn’t get much out of old Confucius, so I thought I’d wait and talk to real people on the boat ride back.”

Matt is good with people. “Leah and I are heading for that old Pub under the Storey Bridge,” he says. “Why not come along and we’ll try to do better over a beer and some salted peanuts?”

Matt draws out the chap; they have an amusing round of drinks and then another. “I may have something for you,” Matt says. “It would only suit a man with a bit of redundancy money and fair to reasonably good hand skills. If that fits, what about meeting up at the entry to Coles at New Farm 10.30am tomorrow?”

Thus, on Saturday morning, Matt takes him into a shop; empty, over the road. It’s not part of the complex; a book exchange run by a very senior citizen has just shut up shop here.

“This is a sitter for a pressing service with a dry-cleaning agency,” Matt tells him. It can be properly equipped at not big cost and there are plenty of third worlders between here and Fortitude Valley to tap for workers and there’s mobs of Yuppies living in the area for a customer base. Things move along; Pats Pressing Service is a huge success. The man forced to retire gets a new lease of life and Matt gets a free pressing service for his duds for as long as he wants. At last count, Pats Pressing Service has six outlets and there’s talk of a franchise deal.

“What did you see in him?” Leah asks.

“A man shell-shocked, but not beyond recovery; a man good with people, physically fit, small vices and now a man that will never again be anything but self-employed. It was just a matter of finding him the right path to put his feet on.”

“Hmmm,” the girl says, “that was just so well done – he wanted action, not mental manipulation. Okay Mr Marvel, what about counselling me?”

Matt laughs. “I thought you would never ask, Leah sweetheart, you’ll have finished your trick cyclist course by November. Enrol right now in Dentistry and forget you ever qualified for the crap stuff you’ve done.” And she does.

Chapter Three

At year end, Matt has his Bachelor of Arts Degree with an Economics Minor and counsels himself. His lack of interest makes him a bit of a spare wheel on his Dad's land holdings at Goonwindi and there are three older brothers on the big place anyway. He's lived with the very smart and good-looking Leah for three years now, so marriage has no novelty appeal to him. He's experienced the highs and lows of living with someone, albeit really compatible and he's learnt a lot, particularly Chinese cooking; been there, done that now he thinks.

He walks along to his Dad's bank, Eastpac, and in a few days, becomes a banker for a while. If this doesn't work, he'll become an English teacher in lieu. But it works. After six months at the Queen Street Mall Branch – down a bit from the Casino, he gets moved to the New South Wales relief staff and posted to Gunnedah while they get their regular staff off on scheduled holidays.

Matt doesn't own a car, so loads his light American made road/trail bike, along with his gear into one of the Courier National vans that cart away the hard copy stuff from every bank branch in New South Wales, five days a week. In no time, he's at Gunnedah and dumps his bike in the branch storeroom and reports for work. He is quick and smart and at day's end, the girl he's working alongside invites him to the pub.

"What?" says Matt, "to meet your boyfriend?"

"Aah," she says, "I'm between boyfriends."

"Oh," says Matt. "In that case let's get a bottle of Bundy and some Coke and all we need then is a bit of privacy."

"You're a racy bastard," she says. Matt laughs.

"There's the quick and the dead," he says. "I'm voting quick just at the moment."

"Okay," she says. "Just a short burst at the Pub and back here to the quarters."

Matt is being housed on the Bank premises for his stay. He's living in the past days Manager's quarters. These days the Managers are housed out in the 'burbs away from the Bank. The old in-house housing is ideal for relief staff use. It certainly provides him with a very suitable spot to romance his co-worker. She's downed a few shooters at the pub and is raring to go and go and go. Finally, they have had enough.

"Jesus, Matt," she says, "that's the most thorough work-out I've experienced so far. Have you been missing out?"

"Not at all," he says. "I've had a three year relationship with a Chinese girl."

"How did you meet up?" she asks.

"She came over one evening to teach me how to cook stir-fry properly."

"And was the meal good?" the girl asks.

"Don't know," says Matt. "We never got around to cooking and ate out at the nearest Italian restaurant after."

"Well, I had better feed you," she says. "I told Mum I was working back, so come on home, she has a roast up. About next weekend," she continues, "I'm a bit busy with netball finals and the wind-up, but I can make it around Sunday night okay."

"No worries mate," says Matt. "Let's fall back on our own devices for the early weekend."

After dinner, he parts with her at the front door.

"Overall a great pleasure," he says.

"Indeed," she says. "It was a very great pleasure being pleased, you active bastard."

Matts now well out of his usual haunts and comfort zone camped in quarters in a strange town, but he's adaptable. Saturday morning he gets his road/trail bike out of the bank storeroom and wheels it over to a nearby servo to fuel it up and pump up the tyres. It's a magnificent looking machine – what isn't bright chrome, is painted up in stars and stripes livery, reflecting its USA origin. It's a real eye catcher. He bought it as is, together with a roomy leather jacket and sloppy bikers' boots and a security chain and lock at a carpark sale near the Antique Centre at Paddington. The chap selling it is resplendent in new Harley Davidson gear, a big man. It immediately catches Matts discerning eye, it's something very different.

"Why are you selling it?" he asks. "It's as new; in fact there are only 700 kms on the clock."

"Went coal mining; fly in/fly out; heaps of readies in my pockets, first time in years. I bought this light machine to see if I could still ride a motor bike. Still could, so invested in a new Harley Davidson. This little beauty is a screaming bargain at \$1500 firm."

Matt buys it. "Best you ride it to New Farm," he tells the vendor. "I don't want to get killed on my first outing."

He never had occasion to ride it in Brisbane, so this is his first outing. A big man fuelling a Kawasaki Ninja comes over for a look.

"Hmm," he says. "No clutch. Auto gears, every bell and whistle you could think of. A few revs will take the riding wobbles out and if you put your boots on the passenger/pillion footrests, you can turn it from an easy-rider to a trail bike configuration."

And so it proves. Matt tootles around Gunnedah drawing more attention than he wants on his bright bike and late afternoon pulls up at the Catholic Presbytery. Gunnedah, he hears, has one of those disappearing commodities, a genuine Irish Priest, who he finds sitting in the sun in a steamer chair enjoying a Scotch and smoking a very impressive Meerschaum pipe. Matt carries in a slipper of pipe tobacco and half a bottle of Chivas Regal. They soon settle in to a pleasant and undemanding meeting.

Matt says, "I'm new to town and I'm just doing what my Mummy told me; joined a church choir, I've sung in the 10am Mass Choir at St Stephens in Brisbane for the past three years. It's the easiest way to dig into a town."

Father Connolly is a bit of a card, late 70's if he's a day.

"You're welcome, Matt," he says. "Apart from the new miners Gunnedah is short on new faces. Why not stay to tea, Mrs Cameron can really do a Gunnedah T-bone steak to a turn and I have a decent bottle of Jacobs Creek Red to go with it. Perhaps we can drink a valedictory toast to the Winery? Not so long back, every fifth bottle of red exported was of that brand, now we hear the economics have gone and the Winery will shortly be no more."

"Well, I suppose," Matt says, "that the good people in Griffiths are just as much under siege as the rest of inland Australia."

Along a bit after a marvellous steak and salad, Matt and the priest are approaching their crusty deep-dish apple pie.

The priest says, "I surely miss Connemara, but this has to be the greatest country in the wide world."

"Indeed," says Matt, "but you beggars have stopped exporting priests and its changing."

Connolly chuckles. "Looking at our new breed of priest, of which there is a ready supply and indeed, looking at the only growing segment of our congregation, I am forcibly reminded of the great Allen McGillvary calling the cricket in Bombay on the

radio – ‘here we are in Bombay, the sun is shining, but there’s a dirty big black crowd on the horizon’.” They rock with laughter. “What a faux pas,” Connolly continues. “Anyway I’m running a mass at St Augustine’s out a bit before the main mass tomorrow. Why not come out on acolyte duty? I can pick you up about 7am.”

On the drive back to Gunnedah, Connolly remarks, “I was brought up on the doctrine of celibacy and all that entails. Part of our Holy Mission, old Bishop Riley used to drum into me. Do you know what one of our new third world priests, a young chap perhaps 27, said to me the other day? Best to do an annual holiday trip to the Philippines Father and get your rocks off. It clarifies ones thinking.”

Matt chuckles. “And what did you think of that, Father?” he asks.

Connolly says dryly, “Well Matt, its advice that perhaps I should have had earlier. It’s all too late now, apart from being reprehensible and sacrilegious. Mind you, looking back, the celibacy thing may have only been instituted to keep the Clergy readily mobile and very cheap to run.”

Mary Cameron has their porridge, eggs, crispy bacon and toast ready when they lob back.

“How did it go, Matt?” she asks. Matt surveys his breakfast spread; looks at Father Connolly tipping generous shots of Napoleon brandy into their coffee and says,

“Ah, Mrs Cameron, I’m contemplating becoming Father Connelly’s Curate and enjoying a breakfast like this every day.”

She chuckles. “Have you heard that famous convict song, ‘Tis the Green Hills of England Now Passing from View’, Matt?”

“Well, yes,” he replies. “I’ve sung it in public, but what’s the relevancy?”

“Ah...our kindly Presbytery scene, like in the song, is surely passing from view, passing forever. We’re not so far from Tamworth and at my age and that of dear old Father here, we won’t be replaced with any new resident. We can expect a moon-faced Burmese or a sharp-faced Filipino will finish up motoring up from Country Music City (Tamworth) every Sunday and we will be ‘Gone With the Wind’.”

Chapter Four

Back at the quarters, Matt belatedly sits down at his small Remington typewriter and settles into some serious drafting and typing. He has rather a considerable writing effort running in the Brisbane Courier Mail Sunday Supplement. During his Bachelor of Arts, he settled down to a deal of creative writing; found it was easy enough, thus his serial staged to run fortnightly for 18 months is now into its eight month. It’s called ‘Cast for Age’ and it’s about a huge Queensland Financier who, at 70 years of age, discarded his rich philanthropic wife from whom he gained his seed capital for a beautiful Chinese girl, 48 years his junior.

It spins off further into other dark corners of Queensland life. It’s a bit like the gripping Melbourne-based ‘Underbelly’. It’s all quite fascinating and it’s not all fully written. He’s usually three issues ahead, but now, as he isn’t in Brisbane and instead of dropping it in the chute at the Courier Mail, he has to post it. He doesn’t want to do this from the town he’s working in, but a Courier National driver posts this in Sydney for him. Matt, of course, spending three nights a week in Fortitude Valley, surely gets the good oil on what’s going on, so he got plenty of grain to grist in his articles. He negotiated the deal with the Courier Mail by post under a pen name. The Mail people get hooked on the story and run it straight away; payment being made to a Building

Society account also in his ersatz name. He's got it up to \$3,000 a fortnight now and he retains the syndication copyright.

Graham Smith, the Sunday Features Editor, gets to bask in the glow of what everyone in Brisbane seems to be avidly reading. Smithy, or Kingsford as he is jocularly called by his contemporaries, is given to dining on the boardwalk restaurants, just along from the venerable old Customs House on the Brisbane River, on Friday afternoons, lunching 'til late. Most newspaper people say that it's rare to get feedback on their featured news articles, but Kingsford is something else again. Everyone, from his drinking mates to the scantily clad drinks wait-girls; wants to know what's in next Sunday's run of 'Cast for Age'.

Now it's very different. Matt is in distant Gunnedah. Thus, Smithy fields the badinage on this particular Friday with some apprehension as this Sunday's article hasn't yet turned up; he's still hoping it will, but it doesn't. The snowball starts with the second wife of a major Director of the paper saying to her oldish husband on Sunday morning, "Terrance, where the fuck is my fortnightly fix of 'Cast for Age'?"

"Gawd, Siobhan," he says, (She's upgraded her name from Bette, which gives you a good picture of this youngish gold-digger) "I'm sure it's there."

"Well, if it is, it must be in the classifieds. I won't have this....here...." She passes him the very latest in do-everything mobile phones. "Ring up the Editor; give him shit." Terrance does and half of Brisbane, except those being show-cased in the gritty serial, have the same thought.

At the editorial meeting on Monday, the Editor says to Kingsford, "Explain, please."

There's not much he can say except, "It never arrived."

"I know," says the editor, and pushes over a heap of emails, a heap of phone messages and the first of many snail mails.

"What did he have to say?"

"Umm," Smithy says, "I don't have a phone number."

"Holy shit," says the editor, "how do I explain this to the board and readers?"

Kingsford has been basking in the glory of this closely read serial and in all honesty, so has the paper. Until Siobhan (Bette) started her tirade on Sunday morning, the paper has never approached realising that they have a literary star on their books. It's been a heavy weekend. The editor holds his heated head in his hands.

"Smithy," he says, "I command you to fix this...or else."

Smithy is petrified; his phone has rung madly all morning, he's had to dump his emails and he hasn't a clue on how to save the situation. He doesn't feel up to explaining that the schematic for the series came in by mail, along with the first three chapters. He doesn't want to tell the group, particularly doesn't want to tell the group, that his begging letters sent to the Brisbane mailbox of Mark McClusky have always been totally ignored. The stuff was so mint, he ran it anyway in the Sunday Edition and he's paid McClusky regularly every fortnight by a credit to his Queensland Permanent Building Society account. Just recently the Southern Press tapped Kingsford to syndicate the serial. He hit them hard for good money and he's paid half of the take each week to the same account. Nothing has ever been acknowledged so he pedals around to the Building Society. It's all wheels within wheels and they admit the account was opened by post and the only withdrawals have been to Pattinson Stock Brokers. Under a bit of pressure, Pattinson's open their share dealing information to Kingsford, but to no avail. The shares, only of Eastpac Bank are bought in McClusky's name and the only address is the Post Office box that Kingsford is aware of.

Chapter Five

Matt moves on in due course to Dubbo. He's quite polished, but in a very unassuming way; a bit better than diffident. He's also, after living solely with Leah for over three years, gotten very good with women. He prospects the girls at the Dubbo Branch; takes the best looker for a drink on his first Friday evening there.

"Are you floating free?" he asks.

"Not at all," she replies. "I'm engaged to be married at Easter. Why, what did you have in mind?"

"It could be a last chance," Matt says. "A possible, or if I may say it, a probable marvellous opportunity lost." She gazes into her drink.

"Indeed," she says, "when... where?"

"I don't have a car," he says.

"I do," she says, "say again....where?"

"Mudgee," Matt says, "I hear there's a beaut little B&B there and it's only about 98kms."

"When would you plan to leave?" she asks.

"Now," he replies. The speediness of this assault on her virtue rocks the girl.

"Pick you up in an hour," she says.

Matt is as disappointed as all hell when his time in dusty Dubbo runs out and he has to load his light motorbike into a courier van and head off to Sydney.

Towards Christmas, Matt gets sent to Goalburn Branch. It's a big one and he's busy enough. There are no bank quarters available and he's not mad about living in pubs. He hunts for something different and finds it through the Manager. He gets temporary occupancy of the unused shearers' quarters at a big farm, seven miles out. The owners are good clients of the bank and are happy to oblige the manager. The farm is a big one; huge shearing shed, the quarters are brick built and are well set up. They house about 20 people; built in the days before shearing teams became commuters.

Matt rattles around the place, but everything is there. He gets tenancy on a Saturday, runs his minimal stuff out on his motorbike and moves into the cook's quarters. He gets into working gear and chops up blocks to fuel the stove and provide plenty of hot water. The farmer comes down to help and lends him a farm ute to go into Mass on Sunday and after, to stock himself up at the quarters.

The young staff at the Branch invite him to come along to the Pub and are very friendly, but having been a bit too close to staff girls at Gunnedah and Dubbo and having gone through a few goodbye traumas, he proceeds very circumspectly in Goalburn.

"Come to the Harvest Ball, Matt," they tell him. "It's very exclusive, but you can use Thea's fiancée's ticket to the Pre-Ball Show – he won't be along until the Ball starts."

Matt's only transport is his motorbike and seven miles after dark is not too bad he thinks, so, on the night, he gets into his Fortitude Valley dinner suit, puts a loose boiler suit over it and by 8pm he is chaining his bike to the pub beer garden railings. The mob are into the turps quickly; Matt again cautious, drinks only ponies of beer. The girls are into the shooters a bit. They finally all chatter along to the Ball venue, the Town Hall where, somewhat to Matt's surprise, is another group of girls sitting awaiting the start of the Ball.

"What's with this lot?" Matt asks his temporary partner. She laughs.

“All misfits,” she says, “the odds and sods. Girls without partners; the pub do was only for couples. That’s how I got you in and here’s my intended. Thanks for your company, Matt. What about a dance later?”

Matt says sure, but by the way she has been tossing off the shooters at the pub, he thinks she may fade out early. He walks along from the mixed mob at the door to the very end of the wallflowers line, to the girl at the very end.

“Hi,” he says, “Can I entice you to dance? I’m Matt, relief staffer at Eastpac Bank.” The girl is dark, very good-looking, very straight-backed and with good shoulder width. She seems surprised at being asked to dance.

“Hmm...yes, thank you. I’m Myfawny, but I seem to get called Miffy; that is, if anyone calls me anything.”

Matt’s mental acuity tells him that there are some deep repressions here, but she comes in his arms and dances well. She is really quite an attractive girl; educated voice – she’s had elocution lessons, he’d bet. At the end of the dance Matt says,

“Let’s sit and talk a bit.”

“Oh, would you?” she says.

“You weren’t at the Pub.”

“I’m not that much into being social – not at all – not in the swim, socially as it were.”

“But you’re here,” Matt says.

“Umm....I have older parents. I work our property with them and we get along just fine, but Dad thinks I should appear at shows like this. I couldn’t give a shit myself.”

“Don’t be like that,” Matt says. “I’m a social misfit too, but even misfits have fun if they’re prepared to get out and about.”

“I don’t doubt it,” she says, but grins a delightful grin. “The thing that absolutely terrifies me at this sort of show is going into supper on my own. I lose my nerve entirely and start stuttering.”

“I don’t believe a word of that,” Matt says. “Your diction is pure cut glass stuff, no sign of a stutter.” She looks at him intently for the first time.

“That just means I feel totally at home with you even though I only met you ten minutes ago.”

“Well...” he says, “let the fun continue. “May I take you in for supper, whenever it is?”

“Oh....it’s a while yet, but you’ve made my night.”

“Well...that’s settled,” says Matt. “Tell me a bit about all the strangers I’m looking at, semi pickled though many of them seem.”

“Well...it’s the chasers they down a lot of; it’s close to neat alcohol. It sure releases inhibitions, but they make a mess of themselves. Now...” she continues, “the young blokes up near the door are in the main Chardonnay farmers. They whoop it up, but their dads really run the properties and they contribute not so much of value, but time will sort that out. There are, of course, non-farmers among them. The tall chap is a gas/electrics man – on the ball, making a good living, sparking that sad-faced blonde seven seats up.”

“Why so sad?” Matt asks.

“Hmm....she’s had breast cancer. She’s not going to marry into the top ranks, but her sparky will pull off a match and it could well be successful.”

“Who’s the leery little bloke giving me the hard eye?”

“Ah....that’s Harry Deight, a very good football player. He’s a driver in the Railways. He’s the scrub bull of that pack.”

“How so?” Matt asks.

“Well, you know how a scrub bull can sniff a heifer coming into season three miles away.....that’s Harry to a tee. If some girl has a little surge of adventure springing up, our Harry is there to ease her out of her pantyhose and to scratch the itch that only Harry seems to know she has. He’s randy, raucous and just this side of dangerous,” she says.

“Now,” she continues, “the blonde girl with the claw cut is the Rural Youth Secretary. The men cluster after her, but they have as much chance of getting a romp out of her as a snowball in hell. She is selectively exclusive and she’s laying for Allen Winter-Hough and he may not know it yet, but he will certainly and without a doubt fall into her daintily spun web and in later years, when he eventually sees the light, his farm, ‘Stony Clough’, of which he is the heir, will be keeping her mum, by then his mum-in-law and filling up the tank at the farm bowser for old Cyril, his by now father-in-law, giving him wheat for his chooks and so on.”

“She’s not a bad looker,” Matt says.

“Ah, Matt, all girls look like their mothers eventually and Christ, you ought to see her. We call her Barty – short for Bartlett pear – she sure is shaped like one.”

“Gawd, Myfawny my sweet, it’s too much. Moving forward, who is the most interesting of the mob we are looking at?”

“Ah...the tall chap with the glasses – he’s sparking Brian Jenkinson’s daughter. That’s her with the beehive hairdo. He’s after her father’s cattle property, ‘Rocky Ridge’. Brian’s the very busy senior partner of the big law firm, Jenkinson, Jenkinson and Glossop. His second wife, Ailsa, has now quietly latched onto the tall chap and it’s very problematical of where it may all end.”

“How so?” asks Matt.

“Well.....Brian’s sparking his Filipino paralegal and she is indeed no fool. It may have a Viking type ending.”

“My god,” says Matt, “this is too much. Who else is of interest?”

“See that lush brush thunder-thighed girl who is unwisely wearing a short cocktail dress instead of a ball dress?”

“Yes,” he says.

“Well, she’s the sports mistress at the High School and is having a no holds barred affair with the 17 year old school captain who, in fairness to Thunder-Thighs, is much older than his years.”

“But he’s not here, I assume.”

“No, too young to meet the strictly 18 age minimum. She’s 27 by the way. You can bet London to a brick, he’s lustfully waiting at her grannie-flat for her to come home – which she will do shortly.”

“God, Myfawny,” he says, “it seems to all get back to sex.”

“Doesn’t it,” she replies. “I should know, I make my living out of sex.”

“My god,” again he says, “are you running an escort service out of the Goalburn Industrial Centre?”

“Not at all,” she says. “I’m the stud groom out at our property and I spent much of my day at this time of year organising very gross sex between consenting mares and our two stallions.”

All in all they have a great evening.

“Where are you boarding, Matt?” she asks.

“Ah....out at Salter’s unused shearers quarters.”

“Hmm, where’s your car?”

“Don’t have one, just a light motorbike.” She chuckles.

"I drove myself in and the ute I'm in has straps to contain a farm bike fitted. Why don't we load your bike and I'll take you back to the farm for the night? I can promise fried scones for breakfast and it's all more homely than Salter's old quarters."

"Okay," he says, "we'll have to pick up my bike from the pub railings."

After supper, with this settled, Matt walks towards the door. He's a bit gobsmacked when the secretary of Rural Youth puts out her arm and stops him. She is quite a looker. "Well hello," she says, "Who are you?" Matt laughs.

"Relief staffer at Eastpac," he says.

"Ah," she says, "I work in banking alley too. What about a coffee Monday?"

"Fine," he says, "name the place and time."

She does and he continues to the door. Harry Deight blocks him, grabs his tie and there he is, looking way down on vertically challenged Harry. He gives Harry a hard look. "What are you doing, fella?" he says. "It may be injurious to your health. Just let go of my tie."

Deight says, "We don't mind at all if you're chasing Miffy, we hope she doesn't spit all over you as she talks, but the blonde is different. She's my mate's girlfriend. Do you hear? Keep off."

While Deight is quite a well-muscled man, although short, he has a fair deal of grog on board.

"Let go," Matt says.

"Bugger you," Deight says, "I've a mind to drag you out the door and put you in your place."

Matt acts decisively; stomps his black Oxford on Deight's shoe. The man doubles up in pain. Seconds later, doing something he has done just so many times at the Valley Nightclubs, he spins Deight like a top, puts his knee in his back, grips his suit coat shoulders and straight-jackets him with the coat. Done very quickly, this is the ideal way to render someone fighting mad, quite harmless. Deight is gobsmacked and can only mouth off. "You bastard.....you bastard, I'll kill you." Matt gives Deight a solid kick in the backside and swings him right, left and centre in this charade.

The inevitable born peacemaker, there's always one, a big Rural Youth chap, steps up. "You'll have to fight him," he says, "Harry never lets go."

Matt chuckles. "Fine, fine.....Monday at 5pm behind the Showgrounds stand will be fine. Now..." he says pushing the immobilised Deight at the newcomer. "He's a bit tanked and I don't want to hurt him, so walk him out before you let him loose. This is a social occasion, not a brawl. By the way," he continues, "make sure he has boxing gloves. This is a Marquis of Queensbury situation.....also a bell for the time-keeper." He walks back down the hall.

Myfawny says, "What did that blonde bitch have to say?"

Matt laughs. "We're doing coffee Monday in banking alley."

"That's amazing," she says. She sees me with the most presentable man in the hall and now she's onto you.....unusually onto you. And the stir at the door?"

"Oh," Matt says, "If Harry Deight gets over what I did to him, we're going head to head Monday behind the Grandstand."

She turns extra serious. "He's dangerous," she says. "An all-in fighter; do you know what you're doing?"

"Ah....we'll let Monday decide that. Let's go and load my bike."

There's a length of channel iron held by a loose bolt in the back of the ute, so it's easy to push the bike on. They drive out quite a bit from Goalburn to the girl's farm. The entry gate makes quite a statement. Tall old brick pillars with 'Tamerland Park' picked out in white Roman letters. A mile in, they enter the old carriage round in front of the house and run the ute into a big old brick outbuilding. Myfawny takes him

in the door of this big house and walks him up the stairs – ‘Gone with the Wind’ type stairs.

“I’ll put you in here, Matt,” she says. It’s a fine room and catches the morning sun.”

“And where will I find you, Miffy?” he asks. She grins.

“You won’t,” she fires back. “I’ll bring you a coffee on a tray in a few minutes. I’ll call you tomorrow when the fried scones start cooking.”

Next morning, Matt is half way down the stairs en route to his bike to get his boiler suit. He’s wearing his dinner suit trousers, an unbuttoned boiler plate shirt and is shoeless. He comes across a rather refined looking gentleman in a dressing gown carrying cups of tea on a silver tray. This chap is on a stick and is making heavy going of it. Matt scoops up the tray.

“I’ll help you with that Sir, if I may,” he says. The man looks him up and down.

“Do I know you?” he asks.

“Not at all, Sir. Myfawny invited me out for a fried scone breakfast at the Harvest Ball.”

“Oh,” he says, “she’s never brought anyone home before, but she is a marvellous scone cooker.”

“I’m sure Sir, it’s just one of her many attributes.” The chap chuckles as Matt hands him back the tray at the top of the stairs.

“Gawd,” the chap says, “you’ll get on.”

After breakfast, Myfawny says to Matt, “Buggar it, but I seem to have two brood mares in season. Dad can’t help as the Teaser stallion knocked him over hard, three weeks back. He’s just got out of hospital. If you wouldn’t mind handling the mare’s head, Matt, I’ll tend to the stallion.”

They go over the orchard to the mating shed. Myfawny smartly runs in a long barrelled chestnut mare on a head stall.

“Hold her there,” she says and he does. Then she runs in the meanest looking stallion Matt has ever seen. He looks askance at this grungy horse. He’s a roan, a bit ewe-necked and pretty fiery.

“He’s only the Teaser, Matt,” she says. “It’s to find out if the mare will accept the horse. We bought this bloke out of a Brumby catch. He’s good enough for his job, but you have to watch the bustard.”

The stallion doesn’t do so well. The mare kicks him around a bit.

“It’s better that this worthless cove gets the kicks,” she says, “rather than Quatre Bras, the lead stallion. He cost us a small fortune to buy and bring in. We never risk him first up.” She brings back a grey placid looking mare.

“She’s never refused the horse here in five visits, but I’ll try the mean one first.”

The mare is ready and Myfawny lashes the brumby away from his intent with a long cutting whip. The Teaser doesn’t like this one bit and goes for her with tooth and hoof, but Myfawny, very quick too, reverses the whip and welts him on the nose. He pulls back and she runs him into a nearby loose box.

“Stand by, Matt,” she says and runs in Quatre Bras. He’s an Irish horse; a blood bay with a long black mane and tail.

“Christ,” says Matt, “that’s the best horse I’ve ever seen.”

Quatre Bras is nothing but focused and leaps on the mare to get on with his job. Myfawny uses a long cane to get him centred and into the mare, then steps back. Matt leaves the mare’s head loose. “Umm...what a turn on,” he says.

“Isn’t it,” Myfawny says, “but not today, Matt.”

Matt replies in a considered way, "I've had a bit to do with rounding up and breaking-in Brumbies at Goonwindi, but that little teaser stallion is pure evil. You should give him a pellet this week."

"What sort of pellet?" asks Myfawny.

"A lead one – between the eyes," Matt says.

"Oh, I can handle him," she says.

"Indeed," says Matt, "but he's purely waiting his opportunity. You can see it in his eyes. He's dangerous."

In the light of much later events, Matt is unfortunately right.

Later, she takes him over to the working sheds on this semi-feudal type property. They are about half a mile over. The sheds are set up in a square; machinery sheds, old unused stabling, hay sheds and a big weatherboard shearing shed.

"Mostly unused now," she says. "The sharecropper brings his own modern gear. We're out of sheep now, but we are big into grey/white cattle – big mobs of them. They're not as hard to handle."

Matt looks along the valley; it's a fair prospect.

"Goalburn Valley," she says, "is inland Australia in microcosm. It's God's own green country in the winter, hot and horrible in the summer, absolutely delightful in early spring and late autumn."

Chapter Six

The dark haired clerk typist lets Matt in the bank door Monday. She was at the Harvest Ball. "My," she says, "you have been a busy boy."

"Umm..." says Matt, "just circumstance."

"Yes," she says, "and it's all go here. The Manager wants you in his office right away and there's cops waiting in the Accountant's office."

Matt goes into Carrick's office.

"Young fellow," he says, "you've only been in town four and a half minutes, metaphorically speaking and you seem to be sparking the Clark-Hall heiress."

"Oh, she's not the only, Sir," Matt replies. Carrick gives him a hard look.

"Ah, yes," he says, "there's her sister, the green-eyed totally magnificent Nicoala – said to be a lesbian."

"Hmm..." Matt says, "Lesbians are people too."

"She's really a bit out of the property inheritance," Carrick says. "Old Wally Clark-Hall bought her a unit in McMahons Point and a stunning holiday home in Terrigal. She's the head of Utz Leemings Legal Firm in Martin Place - heavy metal in commercial/legal circles. Umm..." he continues, "and you're fighting Harry Deight at 5pm. Do you know what you're doing? Deight played centre-half forward for St Kilda despite his lack of height. He's an enormous goer. They had to delist him; he was just to aggro on the ground."

"You can be my second if you like, Sir," Matt says.

"Gawd," says Carrick, "this could cost me my job and retirement (not that far away)." At this stage, Eastpac are unwisely retiring their older managers at age 55.

"Unlikely Sir," Matt says, "you would only be looking after a friend of a big bank client and also looking after your newest and greenest staff member."

Carrick gives him another hard look.

"You don't look too green to me young fellow," he says. "Now I have to bring the cops in.....they've been waiting a while."

He fetches them and they all sit down; two cops, Carrick and Matt.

“Before we start, chaps,” Matt says, “if you guys are here to talk to me, I’m now into bank time and what you are probably here to see me about is not a banking matter. I fight my own battles and I don’t think it proper to involve my employer in this.”

Carrick stands up. “Quite right, I stand corrected. I’ll leave.”

“Decent of you, Sir,” Matt says, “but I can just as easily tell these chaps to come back in my lunch hour.”

Carrick goes; the cops look dourly at Matt. The senior man says,

“We have looked you up. There’s nothing against you, but you are quite a long standing licensed Crowd Controller. The Fortitude Valley Police say you are the only intellectual one in that field, but they also tell us that you should be looked upon as a hard case not averse to violence.”

Matt laughs. “Believe me Officer; crowd control work is not, I repeat not, for the faint-hearted.”

“Hmm,” he says. “Deight, who you are head to head with, is a serious tough nut and as he was a leading member of the Goalburn Premiership team a few months back, has a lot of friends, or at least, supporters. This could be nasty either way. I’d like to see the event canned as half the town will be there at 5pm. Can we perhaps mediate this event away?”

Matt turns serious. “I think,” he says, “that Deight stands to lose more than me. I’m only here for just a while; my opponent is a local permanent. If he’s prepared to express his regret that Saturday’s blue ever happened, we can wave the whole thing goodbye.”

The young cop says, “That would disappoint the whole town.”

The big cop says, “Pipe down Constable. Your suggestion is sensible. We’ll go out and see Deight.” And they do.

It seems it’s all over, but for whatever reason, Deight changes his mind. Matt rides his motorbike up to the showground. There’s about a hundred people there. Carrick marks out the ring and sets down milk crates in the corners. The footy club provide the bell. Deight is wearing black shiny shorts with a white stripe down them; he looks quite professional. Matt just takes off his tie and rolls up his sleeves. He’s the cruiser-weight boxing champion of Brisbane University and he’s got a huge height and reach advantage over Deight.

They get into it. Matt has a marvellous left jab and he zonks this into Deight’s face, gives him a bloody nose and is working on a cauliflower ear. At the end of round three, Harry spits the dummy. Matt is distracted a bit – he sees old Clark-Hall and Myfawny in the crowd. He’s astonished, but just as he sees them, Deight roars – “You bloody poof, let’s take these stinking things off and get into it properly.” The referee looks at Matt and the big cop steps in to intervene.

“I don’t think I can properly allow this,” he says. “I don’t want a melee developing.”

The crowd start to get restless and start yelling advice. Matt hops up on his milk crate and holds up his hand for silence.

“I come from the land, fellows,” he says, “and I want to remind you of the old shearing team fight maxim – ‘urgers to the shithouse’.” To the cops, he says, “Let’s put this whole sorry business to rest. One round only, six minutes, judges’ decision is final.”

They take off their gloves, have a drink of water and the bell goes. Matt has been taught Comanche Wrestling down at the Valley. He takes two enormous bounds, grabs Deight hands, claps them to his head, kicks Deight in the stomach with

his sturdy oxfords, anchors his foot there and falls backwards to the ground using his stiff leg as a lever. *'Only a sucker would fall for this,'* Matt thinks as Deight goes flying through the air and lands badly. He tries to get up, but Matt gives him the mother and father of a rabbit killer and that's the end of it. Matt, in one spring, gets back on his milk crate.

"This matter's settled," he says. "If any one of you out there isn't happy, step up now, but one at a time." The crowd have seen enough, there are no takers.

The cop says, "Well.....fair enough, but it might be an idea to stay a few days somewhere else in the district other than on your ownsome in isolated shearers quarters."

Matt walks over to the Clark-Halls. "Nice of you to come," he says. Clark-Hall shakes hands.

"Fought like a man, Matt," he says. "I put my pump-action shotty in the boot in case things went badly for you." Myfawny cracks an engaging grin.

"Boy," she says. "You're very polished, but are you into the physical!"

"I need a bed for a few nights," Matt says, "Cops orders."

Clark-Hall says, "We'd be glad to oblige."

"I'll get a six-pack and follow you home," Matt says.

"No," Miffy's dad says. "We'll get all that and perhaps a takeaway tea. Miff hasn't been home to do tea, so we'll get a filler-in."

They have a pleasant tea, informally, in the sun room. Matt is sinking a few tinnies and relaxing. Clark-Hall looks shrewdly at Matt.

"I've never seen such a mix of Queensbury and filthy fighting in the one afternoon, Matt," he says. "Tell us the story."

"Umm.....well.....I've boxed for the Uni and have been a crowd controller in Fortitude Valley. You could say, Sir, I've seen it all."

"Tell us a bit about the Valley, Matt. We heard just so much of it in the Fitzgerald Report."

"Not unlike Kings Cross," Matt says, "but safer than Perth's Northbridge, I'm told."

Miffy is giving him eye signals – very definite eye signals – wrap it up, she is mentally signalling him. Thus he does and she takes him over to the stallion pen.

"Matt," she says, "your physicality has got me stoked. You've boxed and fought dirty and now's the time for a wrestle. I plan to lose the contest after a bit of token resistance." And she does. They are both lying on the straw of the pen, somewhat breathless. "I think, Matthew," she says, "that we can regard each other as an item. That is, if you are willing."

Matt cups her nearest breast in his big hand. "Going, going, gone," he says as he pushes her shoulders back on the straw.

Chapter Seven

At this inopportune time, Matt's conscience reminds him of his overdue next issue of 'Cast for Age' and while he is having the time of his young life with Miffy, he arrives at an answer.

Thus, about a week later, Kingsford, at the Courier Mail, gets a missal from his correspondent, McClusky, telling him that his star writer is on holidays in Spain and sending with it a very entertaining and imaginative account of his travels. This fills in the gap quite well and isn't at all bad when you consider he's never been to Spain and

he's getting the whole content out of the reading in the library of his temporary abode. In point of fact, being away from the Valley now Matt has to dig harder at a distance for the dirt that he previously almost picked up by osmosis at the Valley. Matt considers in fact striking a deal with the 'Cast for Ages' subject to close the long-running serial down. Cash up front and no more serial might suit everybody and put a lump sum in Matt's pocket.

Carrick takes pity on Matt biking in and out on his light motorcycle and lends him a Bank car in exchange for Matt filling in for one of the Agri-Bankers who circulate in the area and who is due for holidays. This chap wants to get back to Dubbo and Matt discovers with quite a shock, that he will shortly be marrying the Bank girl Matt has been making free with in the Bed'n'Breakfast at Mudgee.

The Clark-Halls easily accept the situation and Matt fits seamlessly into banking and farm life and indeed, makes himself very useful around the farm in his free time. Clark-Hall is a lot more mobile than he was and invites Matt for a walk around the front drive.

"I don't understand modern life," he tells Matt. "Here we are, no talk of marriage, yet you are living with my younger daughter." They stop and sit on a stone bench. It offers a fine view of the big homestead. Clark-Hall pulls out some cigars and a silver spirit flask, plus a couple of shot glasses. They light up their stogies with long tapers and sip their drinks. "Let's hear a bit from you, Matt," he says. "You've brought a ray of sunshine into our lives and I don't at all underestimate your intelligence."

"I don't know about modern youth either, Sir," Matt says. "I do know it's Liberty Hall these days for young people. According to the Sydney Morning Herald, most girls have, on average, twelve partners before they settle down."

"Indeed," says Clark-Hall, "but closer to home, what is the next move?"

"Umm.....I haven't asked Myfawny yet to marry me. I think it's understood. I would certainly like your permission when that comes up on the horizon, but I should first tell you what you are getting into."

"I'm told," Clark-Hall says, "that I'm lucky if you ask for Miffy's hand. I've looked into your background a bit. You seem too good to be true."

"You may not have looked deep enough," Matt says. "For instance, you may not know that I was charged by the Police with causing grievous bodily harm to a Brisbanite."

"Yes, I do," says Clark-Hall. "Your case was tossed out of court."

"Indeed," says Matt, "but if they were aware, that at that time I had worked for a year in the Valley, I might not have got off so lightly. Also," Matt continues, "there is just a possibility that I may have a paternity case on my hands. It's about a fellow bank staffer at Gunnedah."

"And are you responsible?" he asks.

"Not at all," replies Matt, "but I was involved with the girl. Her parents probably see me as a better prospect than the real culprit."

"You don't seem worried," Clark-Hall says.

"No," rejoins Matt, "it's just an amicable ploy that I can shake off easily enough."

"Hmm," says Clark-Hall, "and what else should you be telling me?"

"I don't need to tell you anything," Matt says, "but I will. I have a slightly seedy serial running in the weekend Courier Mail under a pen-name – under the name Mark McClusky; it's called 'Cast for Age'."

"Bloody hell," Clark-Hall says, "that's being syndicated in all the major newspapers, the alleged subject has been threatening to sue the writer for his socks and he's a powerful man."

“He won’t,” Matt says. “I’ve written only the truth and he sure wouldn’t want it confirmed.”

“Well, it’s damn interesting and entertaining. You could make a living in Journalism.”

“I sort of do,” Matt says. “I have three other columns running in the major press, but if I may, I’ll keep those dark. But you may be reassured to know I invest all of that fairy gold dosh in Eastpac shares and only Eastpac shares.”

Clark-Hall tops up their glasses and gestures towards the house.

“What would you do with this, Matt?” Matt sips and studies the house.

“Since you ask,” he says, “and bearing in mind your good wife’s health situation, I would do this.” He gestures at the very fine stone Georgian house, stone with a Welsh slate roof; marred by ugly weatherboard extensions, roofed with iron sheets sticking out each side.

“I would tear off the wings completely.”

“That would leave a big hole in the main walls each side,” Clark-Hall says.

“Indeed, but a decent steel and glass conservatory each side would balance up one of the best designed houses in Australia.”

“We both have difficulty getting up the stairs,” says Clark-Hall.

“One thing at a time, Sir,” Matt says. “The timber wings are lined in their entirety with Coffs Harbour Red Cedar, mostly over two inches thick. It’s a virtual treasure trove of the very best furniture material anywhere in Australia. It will bring in a small fortune.”

“And....?” Clark-Hall asks. Matt gestures at the Australian Colonial Coachman’s house off to one side in the old park.

“Look at that,” he says, “a classic 30 degree pitch, 15 degree verandahs. The lining Red Cedar from the extensions would pay for turning that into a fully air-conditioned house for you without a sign of a bloody stairway.”

Three summers come and go. Matt is in New Zealand at a big banking conference. Carrick rings him from Goalburn. Matt is taking over the overall management of the big branch next month. He expects only to hear a bit of nitty gritty from his caller, not devastating, life-changing news.

“Matt,” he says, “I bring only the grimmest of tidings. Myfawny has come to a very sticky end in the stallion pens at Tamerland Park; kicked in the head by the teaser stallion. He then trampled all over her three times to service the mare that they were using him on to see if she would take the horse. If it’s any consolation, and I appreciate it isn’t, the Doctor reckons she went out instantly from the kick.”

After a long pause digesting this cataclysmic news; Carrick quite perceptively and decently just holds the line.

“Jumping Jesus,” says Matt. “This is just too much. How is Wally?”

“They are both devastated,” Carrick says. “I’ve rung Nicoala in Boston (she’s been there with the firm for the past three years). She’s got things in hand and will fly out tonight for Goalburn.”

With the obsequies over, Nicoala nudges Matt.

“Matthew, “she says, “you have been a brick. Everyone here at Tamerland Park owes you much. I have to go up to Sydney tomorrow to consult with my firm; I have a deal to discuss with them. Carrick is not expecting you back for a while and we sure need you here to keep the pot boiling. What about lunch in Sydney today week? I should have a course set out by then.”

Matt arrives at her harbour view office, near the Bridge in downtown Sydney at the appointed time. The girl is looking stunning in a green muted tone dress that matches her green eyes (*'and well she knows it,'* Matt thinks).

We're dining just down a bit, Matt," she says. "There's a car and driver waiting, but first I want you to see the coroner's report."

She pushes a buff file over her Red Cedar desk. It confirms what Matt has already been told. The kick to the head was fatal. What he doesn't know as he reads down the page is that Myfawny was pregnant at the time. He is stunned, really stunned. The green-eyed one retrieves the file, draws a perfectly manicured finger over Matt's lips. "Lunch," she says, "we'll talk later."

They go to a beautiful restaurant in a Town-house set-up; sandstone bricks blasted back to their original surface, small English tables, heavy silver and damask. It's the very acme of good, good taste. She orders for them both; clear soup, Barramundi, Greek salad. A couple of frosted tankards of full strength lager arrive. At the sweets stage, Nicoala says, "Time to talk, Matt. You've brought a lot of sunshine into those whose lives are involved in Tamerland Park. Mum and Dad could be languishing in a retirement home, but have been both happy and contented in the old Coachman's house, while you and Myfawny got on with your lives in the big house. I propose that instead of selling off that beautiful bit of inland Australia, we kick along there. I have no yearning for children. My next step is into the Australian Senate. When Joe Hennessy goes out with the dreaded 'Jack the Dancer', I'll take over the unexpired part of his term. Why don't we marry? It would allow for continuity in what's left of my parents' life. I know you are no peasant, but even if you are rich – and I don't think you are – this idea will make you rich. You are very good at what you do. You would stand up for the old family property and I would make you a half decent wife."

Matt looks hard at her.

"Nicoala, I'm flattered at your suggestion, but I thought...."

She grins, "Matt, I'm no lesbian. It just suited me to play one to get a head march on the competition. If the men wipe you off in the climb to the top, it gives a girl a rail's run to get past them – and I have."

They get through the dessert course silently. At the end, Matt grins.

"Christ, what an offer. I'll accept, subject that is, to a trial canter."

"Matt, I didn't have a clue as to which way you would go. I know you are your own man. Let's just adjourn to my suite at Potts Point and you can canter.....or even gallop."