



Part Three
Steady The Light Brigade

A Les Norton Novel
With apologies to the late Robert G Barrett

Introduction

Robert G Barrett – Bondi butcher and later resident of Terrigal, has provided many Australians and also overseas readers with his entertaining escapist books featuring that true blue Aussie character, LES NORTON.

Les cruises through life applying common sense to complex situations and a tad of measured aggression when needed and deserved. He's good with women and is a clean-living type with a penchant for buying good brand names in what he wears. Sadly, Robert G Barrett is no longer around. That doesn't have to mean that his famous Les Norton character created by RG has to disappear with RG.

In a spirited attempt to keep Les alive and up and doing, Lloyd Nelson has penned a sequel with legs, of Les's latest escapades. Nelson is not bad on sequels. His last one is Richard Marston's Journey – a continuation of Rolf Boldrewood's famous story, 'Robbery Under Arms', that could have been written by Boldrewood, himself. Read it on lloydnelson.net short stories.

Dear reader, we need your support to keep Les Norton alive.

Pictured:

Lloyd Nelson on the day he published his first book in the late '70's



Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Four

Les Norton, the big red-headed Queenslander, Senator from NSW, is sitting in his shared Federal Parliament House office, pulling on quite a decent Cuban cigar, a whisky close to hand. There's a bit of a tentative bubble occurring at his office door. It's the Chief Labour Whip Colbert and the PM's vinegary tongued Chief of Staff making a subdued entrance, or hoping to.

"Ah," says Les to Clarrie Miller, his office sharer, also a Senator. "What do you think this pair of dubious bastards want?"

"Umm," Colbert says, "no doubt you've heard that the PM is about to declare a double dissolution later today?"

"Yep," Les says. "I've surely heard the rumour, a rumour that the press gallery have been trumpeting for days. Why is the PM rushing into the tumbrils when he could hang on for quite a bit?"

"Ours isn't to reason why, Old Cock," the girl says.

Les chuckles. "Well, Old Girl, there is perhaps a ray of sunshine among all this shit in that you won't be back unless you're happy to be Chief of Staff for the about to be, at least temporarily, Leader of the Opposition."

Colbert rushes in. "We're here from the PM," he says. "You can have the number one Senate spot, no pre-selection hassles of course."

Les chuckles again. "Well Captain Smith," he says, "you're here to offer me a deckchair on the Titanic it seems, when you've never offered me a seat in the Inner or Outer Cabinet."

The girl says, "Well, you were only filling in the unexpired term of the late Senator and the PM felt it better to not rock the boat."

"Well," Les says, "I guess your intentions are good so you can either join me and Senator Clarrie in a whisky or piss off. It's up to you."

They depart quickly. Les reaches for the bottle of single malt and tops up their squat glasses.

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Five

Malcolm Naismith sends a runner around to Les's office, wants a meet up at a discreet Italian restaurant in the Canberra suburb of Hawker. He's there seated when Les arrives. A sole minder nods as Les comes in.

"Onya Les," the potential new Prime Minister says, as Les arrives at the table. "Got a good seat for you, cobber. Based on Maryborough/Wide Bay. I'm sending the incumbent off to France as Ambassador."

"Kerrist," Les says, "tell him not to go walking on the Promenade at Nice or go to Mass in Rouen. Also to watch himself in Paris, otherwise take a shotgun with him and watch out a bit."

"Yeah, yeah," Malcolm says. "As promised, we want you in a new overlapping portfolio as the new Minister for the Interior. It gives you the boss handle on the AFP and a big look in at ASIO. Dash has got us all worried at the moment and we will be looking for you for a bit of dramatic action when the election is over and we are in with a thumping majority."

“Simple,” says Les. “Any of the bastards can leave and go where they like, but not that many will have an intact passport when they want to get back.”

“Well,” Malcolm says. “It worked with that bikie chief now languishing on Malta.”

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Six

The Maryborough/Wide Bay election turns up trumps. Les as usual declines to make a victory speech. He, as he says on the night, follows a policy of avoiding speeches per se, except when he is in Parliament and talking under parliamentary privilege. But the local Liberal Chairman does the honours quite well using some points made earlier to him, when the trend was running the right way, by Les. There’s a fair bit of hub bub and an unusually long delay in the Senate count.

Malcolm Naismith fills in a bit of the waiting time gap with an open afternoon of champagne and canapes, complete with several very good string quartets playing on the Yarralumla lawns. The House has just been refitted and quite a few trendy architects, (none of which Les would employ to design his upmarket Tom Roberts type ‘Shearing the Rams’ replica shed at Downpatrick) have had a finger unfortunately in the pie. But it doesn’t matter so much as there is no risk of Malcolm doing other than camping there overnight once in a while when Parliament is sitting.

‘A damn expensive place to maintain for the occasional bun fight,’ Les thinks.

As luck has it, the weather is just right, if barely so, for an outdoor function. Les, beautifully suited in a Yorkshire Tweed country suit and pulling on his big bowl, short stem cherry wood pipe strolls jocularly around the scene, touching base here and there, but not joining any group in particular. Eventually, the man of the day, his Prime Minister host brushes up with him.

“Waddy think, Les?”

Les chuckles. “Malcolm,” he says, “it’s an accepted truism that Canberra really fucked up a very good sheep station. That said,” he continues, “a court martial and summary shooting of the latest lot of architects would, I think, round the day off very satisfactorily.”

Malcolm chuckles. “Perhaps not a good idea,” he says. “Architects probably vote Liberal.”

“No,” says Les, “they vote for whoever pays them. Believe me, you haven’t got value for money on this job. As for the mob you’re entertaining here this afternoon, I expect you will lose a lot of the silver when they go home.”

“That’s a given,” says Malcolm. “They are Politicians after all.”

The first Liberal Party room meeting gets a bit fraught. While Les has turned a marginal seat around to the Party’s advantage, there’s deep resentment that he has changed parties, obviously to his personal advantage. He cops a fair bit of rubbish at the meeting, some of it quite visceral. Les finally stands up, deathly silence prevails.

“Well,” he says, “we are here for the common good. I’ve given you mob aa fair bit of toco in the Senate, but I want to warn you at the outset of this Government, that if you don’t pull up your socks in aa meaningful way, I’ll move onto the National Party, the party that made a huge mistake when they changed their name from the Country Party. They seem to be providing the backbone and guts that you self-centred bastards lack.”

“Ah, the Country Party,” one of the alleged heavyweights in the Party rooms comes out with. “It’s generally understood that we, the Liberals represent big business (and when it suits us, small business). It’s generally acknowledged that Labour represents the workers and it’s generally acknowledged that the Nats Country Party sits on the fence and talks about the high cost of fencing.”

“And with good reason,” Leslie ripostes. “I’ve just paid for five miles, eight kilometres that is, of renewed boundary fencing at the property Downpatrick in the Western Districts, that I’m involved with. Believe me, it’s a very expensive thing to be funding.”

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Seven

The critics subside a bit after this in the Party room. It’s not much of a win, but it’s his second one of this first sitting day. On his way into Parliament House, the press-pack eagerly descend on Les. He doesn’t attempt to rush past them, he is always nonchalant in his approach, but he also talks about things they don’t want to talk about.

“What’s the thrust of your programme today, Mr new Minister for the Interior?” they cry.

Les stops, pulls out of his jacket a tamped pipe and lights it up. He’s not really a pipe smoker as such, but he does indeed know how to smoke a pipe well.

“Ha,” they say, “you’re attempting to do a Bob Menzies pipe-a-thon.”

Les laughs. “Our honoured founder,” he says, “tried to pipe his way around London when he was our top man. All he succeeded in doing was giving an unforgettable and on film record of how not to smoke a pipe and also what sort of pipe not to smoke.”

He puffs a bit of aromatic smoke around the entry. “My focus today is something you surely must be aware of,” he says. “There will be soon be a bill presented to abolish the press gallery and replace it with something market research shows us that would be more effective.”

“Such as?” they cry.

“Hmm,” he says, “our thinking is of a wire cage to occupy the space you are standing in – with a pair of Mountain ducks therein. Our research shows that a pair of Mounties honking away in the entry can be useful.”

“That’s ridiculous,” a new member of the gallery says. “How could a pair of Mountain ducks do our job better?”

“Well...” says Les, “they surely couldn’t do it any worse.”

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Eight

Les cops a bit of flack after his new appointment of Minister of the Interior comes through. Question time on day one sees one of his former Party up on his heels asking what action Les is contemplating in relation to securing Oz from terrorists. But Les is up to the challenge. He stands up. He looks quite formidable in an immaculate Milan sourced flannel suit and sober tie.

“Mr Speaker,” he intones. “Only fools and old women question work that is yet to start, let alone progress. That said,” he continues, “I have my staff looking deeply into a case to deport you to somewhere that may suit your mental capabilities more

precisely. Perhaps, Terra del Fuego, given financial benefits commensurate with the case to give you political refuge.”

There is a deathly silence.

He carries on. “My friend, Blind Freddy knows that for every action under the law of physics spawns an opposing reaction. You are sort of declaring war on old pacifist me. This, may I assure you and Members of this House, is an action fraught with risk. May I suggest you wear a tin helmet when next question time comes up – because as sure as shit, you are gunna need it.”

The Speaker promptly calls on Les to withdraw his remark. Les gets up again.

“No way, Jose,” he says. “After such a duck-wit question, I’d be better off being tossed out of the House for a while instead of being here crossing swords with mental deficients.”

“So be it,” the Speaker says.

Les stands prior to leaving the Chamber.

“Well, Madam Speaker,” he says, “Unlike Tony Abbott, I do know which door is the exit one.”

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Nine

The head of the AFP and the head of the CCC are bombing Les’s office for a get together. The AFP man says, probably fairly, that with a new Minister of the Interior, which is a change from a Labour to Liberal man, it would be appropriate for a get together to ensure they are both on the one page. Whatever the CCC want is unstated.

Les grumpily messages the AFP that if the boss wants to see him, he should make an appointment to meet him in his Parliament House office. The man messages back that as he’s operating out of Sydney, a meet up there with good media access would be best. Les ignores this for three weeks and repeats his previous message.

Before the meeting happens, Les removes the visitor chairs from the office and holds the meeting standing up. He is not a fan of the AFP man and thinks it best to keep this chap on his toes. The AFP chap has three assistants with him, humping a heap of paperwork.

“We have much to discuss,” he says, cocks his head, looks Les in the eye.

Les buzzes his PA, Andrea. He returns the look.

“I operate one on one,” he says, gestures to Andrea. “Look after my visitors,” he says and gestures the assistants out of the room.

Behind the scenes, Andrea gives them Starbucks type coffees and Danish pastries. Les runs his electronic device over the head cop, gives him a bottle of warm spring water.

“Time is of the essence,” he says. “Tell me of your three or perhaps four pressing matters. The rest can wait.”

It’s all over in ten minutes. The chap’s idea of what is pressing includes his idea of a (almost certainly a self-promoting) media conference.

“No,” says Les and ushers the man out.

The CCC man is next up for a visit. Les is on his wheel. He’s got a list of CCC cases being studied or prosecuted at the moment. Les is perfectly well aware that they have put a near full time investigator on his wheel.

“You’ve got a smart young chap on your staff,” he says. “I want you to post him to Walgett for three months. There are several NSW coppers I’m suspicious of and I want them investigated. See to it.”

That gets rid of his hound dog for a while. Despite his lackadaisical approach, Les is moving on his portfolio. He has borrowed Alby Jordan, his previous Police driver/Minder for a bit of black ops work from Lou Caccano, the Commissioner of NSW Police. Les has briefed Alby in his Parliament House office.

“It’s like this,” he says, “While we’ve had some ‘God is Great’ inspired events in Oz, there has been little loss of life. But our continued support for what is going down in Iraq and Afghan land means of course, that trouble of a deeper nature is coming down the pike. What chance of getting a wire into that Mosque at Lakemba?”

Alby has done undercover work in the Middle East. He is word perfect in Arabic. Given a splash of tanning fluid and time to grow whiskers, he can robe up and go into any Mosque, sort of. Lou has Alby keeping an eye on the ‘God is Great’ mob in and around Sydney.

“Mmm...” he says, “the Fakirs in charge are too smart to start any Jihads themselves, they value their lifestyles in Oz. But they have visiting firmen revving up the young ones here and there at Mosques, sowing the seeds. Yes, a wire is a possibility, a very valuable and enlightening possibility.”

“You’ll need better and more undetectable gear than we have,” Les says, “and we badly need some nerve gas that we can fire from a RPG. Let me set up a meet with the American Ambassador and his resident CIA man. I’ll contact you to come along when it’s set up.”

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy

“On a different tack,” Alby says, “a big part of the problem is the unemployed ‘God is Great’ youth. Youth unemployment in Oz is quite endemic for all youth. Both colours get bored out of their minds and are susceptible to mischief in its many forms. The AFP are big on stopping them going to the Middle East and jailing them for trying to do so.”

“What would you suggest, Alby?” Les asks.

“Hmm...well, don’t put any obstacles in their way. Let them go, but pull their passports the minute they go out to the plane.”

“But that adds to the shooters in the Middle East.”

“Does it matter?” Alby says. “In the main, if they’re Shi-ites, they will only be shooting Sunnis or vice versa.”

“What about the Septic Tank targets?” Les asks.

“What does it matter?” Alby says, “if they’re there potting Yanks? The fact they ever went in in the first place brought all these troubles on our heads. The Yanks are great on starting wars, but with the exception of WW2, they’ve never shown any ability to finish one – and so it goes. There’s a rabble raiser visiting the Lakemba Mosque. Quite a firebrand I believe. He starts his rant after the head Mullah finishes Friday prayers and leaves the building. They look the leftover crowd pretty closely. I haven’t been brave enough or silly enough to stay for the rant yet.”

“Why not get a wire in place?” Les asks.

“They run a detection wand over things before he sounds off – it’s all quite ominous really.”

After a deal of thought, Les goes around to the Israeli Embassy. They are technocrats of the first degree, thus he soon acquires the latest hi-tech non-detectable listening device ever. Alby, posing as a NSW Electrical Inspector, soon gets this in place. They are well aware that discussions on the next terrorist action won't show up on the new device, as these will take place very quietly elsewhere, but the broad urgings of the Mullah for direct action to be taken will. This gives the listeners a bit of notice of trouble looming.

And loom it certainly does when a very resolute group of 'God is Great' types set up a Saturday morning massacre at the Salamanca Markets. They decimate over 80 market people and from a further removed site bowl over police and security forces when they rush to the scene.

Les has a deal of planning in place for this happening, although of course, they have no prior notice of the actual shooting site selected. The first whiff of this Les gets is on a special of SBS News. They are way ahead of the ABC. There is no internet or mobile phone connection at Les's Bondi abode, but he has a big bank of TV sets running on mute, which tends to keep him abreast of events.

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy-One

First up Les asks Alby Jordan just where in Oz the fire-brand Fakir is doing the Friday revving up at the moment. Alby is on the ball.

"He's due to fly out to Indonesia at 6pm this evening," he tells Les.

"Onya, Alby," Les says. "Arrest the buggar and bring him down to Hobart under guard. We'll go ahead to sus things out pending your arrival. I'll send the Lear Jet back to pick you up a bit later today."

By well laid plans ready for such an emergency an Air Force Lear Jet, loaded with ordnance, whips them down to Hobart smartly and transport there takes them to the Markets' site swiftly. It's a bit of a weird scene. There are bodies lying just about everywhere from the start-up of this bloody event. But it's also a very dangerous situation to assess and action. Swat teams are on the scene, but sheltered behind buildings. The terrorists are operating from two buildings. One, a two storey looking onto the Markets area, the other, a huge hotel where they seem to have set up a strong ground level team and high up snipers are running riot, shooting from the height and safety of the hotel's top floors.

Alby arrives along with the much protesting Muslim in tow. He's making a lot of noise and yelling that his lawyer will be along with a writ of habeas corpus in no time. Les shoves a sock, borrowed rather rudely from one of the soldiers, in his mouth and wraps a bit of duct tape around the chap's head to hold it in place. Alby sums up the situation. These beggars are well equipped. The foot-soldiers are using common or garden variety AK47's.

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy-Two

Just as they talk, a SWAT man carrying a BAR runs a bit deeper into the complex. Although there is no sound of a shot, he goes on the paving like a sack of wheat, doesn't move a muscle.

"Shit," Alby says, "that's another down to the Pub snipers."

"What the hell is he using?" Les asks. All the men are wearing body armour.

“Ah...” Alby says, “very likely a VAL silent sniper rifle. Russian, very hush hush until 1983 when the Pentagon captured one in a Black Op and later copied it. They fire sub-sonic rounds. They’ll penetrate body armour up to about 400 yards away. They’re very impressive, 9mm rounds, matt black with a skeleton stock. We can’t consider moving the bodies while the baddies have clear lines of fire.”

“Alright,” Les says. He whistles up Trudy for a meet.

“Got your all-embracing authority in your bag, love?” he asks.

“Surely,” she says. “What do you want done?”

‘Umm...go up to Government House and commandeer his walled garden for next Saturday’s markets. See the new site goes on the radio and Facebook. Track down a party firm to get outside drum fires in safe spots in the area (its bitterly cold, wind from the frozen south). Round up a couple of food vans and get them on site.’

She goes off smartly. Les now talks to the siege force OIC.

“Softly, softly,” he says. “Preserve life. Stand your men back.”

“What’s your game plan?” the man asks.

“Um...,” says Les. “We would like a couple of them alive so we can have an intense little chat. It’s worth a try, but we can’t stairway fight the mob in the pub. There’ll be too many casualties. We may have to starve or smoke them out. Just watch that none escape and let me get on with a plan to get this mob in the lower building walking and talking.” He calls up Alby.

“Mate, if this was Baghdad, your old stomping ground, how would you go about getting a couple of them alive?”

“Covering fire on the upstairs, we’ll use the Mossberg Persuaders with Bennecke Magnum slugs.” He has one handy to demonstrate. These things are pistol grip, no sights, 12 gauge, six shot magazine and short (18 inch) barrel. A very nasty close up street weapon.

“But you won’t get near them,” Les says.

“The dead-eye dicks in the pub will see to that....smoke canister,” Alby says, “we used them in Iraq to screen us getting ‘God is Greater’ out of the Mosques during Prayers. But let’s soften them up first, no action at all, turn off the water, power and sewerage just for starters and ease off the vigilante squads. Dead quiet is what we want. Pity we can’t move any of the victims.”

“No, we can’t,” Les says, “but we can use the scene to create support for what I have planned in Sydney.”

Les, using an encrypted satellite phone, now sends the Army into Lakemba Mosque. They brick up all the entry doors using limestone blocks, weld sheet steel over anything too high to brick and weld up the gates. Leaks to the Press that demolition charges will be fitted to the building next. It creates quite a stir and hopefully a bit of diversionary thoughts in those running the siege in Hobart.

Next morning, early, they run an aged Army tank driven by remote control into the killing zone and manoeuvre it a bit. The reaction is not long in coming. The besieged are stocked up on tank destroyer stuff and the old tank goes up like a helium balloon.

“Worth a try,” Les says, “but let’s now sit very doggo.”

Which they do for 8 days. Sitzkreig, the press call it. The Army men quiz Les.

“What about a head on assault?” they ask.

“Not yet,” he says. “Like the famous Flashman of ‘Tom Brown’s School Days’, I do not make a practise of seeking sorrow or at least, not yet.”

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy-Three

Les stays close on site. The Army guys find him some fatigues. He wears a big revolver on his hip and a General Patton style helmet. The TV absolutely loves him. Malcolm Naismith comes down for a look-see.

“What’s happening, Les?” he asks.

“Nothing,” Les says, “we’re softening them up.”

“Geez, Les,” he says. “You simply have to get the victims picked up. The TV are showing the slaughtered ones in full cover every ten minutes.”

“Give it another day,” Les says, “I’m putting plans in place.”

Malcolm says, “As you know Les, we’ve only a minute majority. I’m afraid the thug in a suit (Leader of the Opposition) will take advantage of you not being in the House and jamming some unpalatable bills through.”

“Have you heard anything?” Les asks.

“No,” he says, “not at all, but it gives the beggars a golden opportunity to pull some tricks. And remember Les, as old Willie Shakespeare says in ‘12th Night’ – IN DELAY LIES NO PLENTY – in short, get on with the job.”

“Yes Massa,” Les says. “Stick around until tomorrow, it’s going to be lively.”

Alby brings around the young Fakir, complete with handcuff restraints and ball and chain. They pop him into a ‘porta-loo’, which Les has caused to have the side cut out and replaced with clear armour plate glass. They fire a cable across the square without exposing themselves, tie one end to the ‘porta-loo’(which is on runners) and turn on a PA system run from a battery.

Les tells the mullah, “Charlie, here is your chance to stop this nonsense and to save yourself at the same time. We’re about to tow you into the killing zone, where, when you press the PA button, you can call them to evening prayers and suggest they come out with their hands up. Now this may take you a bit of time, so we’ve put a bit of Polish sausage and some bottles of water in the loo. So, God speed and off you go. If the boys in the pub up there can’t be convinced, then you can look forward to your 50 black-eyed virgins in Paradise.”

They trundle him away, yelling and cursing as he goes.

“Infra-red rifle scopes, Alby,” Les says. “If they try to get him out overnight, I’d like to capture someone shot in....say...the leg or knee. High power .22 bullets please. We want them talking or more likely able to talk than deady-bones.”

Tomorrow sees a white flag hung out of the lower building and one man emerges. Alby beckons him around the alley corner where there is protection from snipers in the high-rise pub.

“We’ll come after morning prayers tomorrow,” he tells Alby. “We will carry our primary weapons at arm’s length and will stack them here at the start of the alley in tripod form. We then will place us in your hands.”

Alby listens to this, beckons to the rebel to follow him a fair bit deeper into the alley, puts a chalk mark on the wall.

“Once,” he tells the man, “you are non-armed and in this alley, you can walk to this chalk mark. One step further and we will mow you down like corn. Understood?”

The man nods and returns to where they are holding out. So there is no misunderstanding, Alby takes a brush and a small tin of acrylic paint and paints a white line where the chalk mark is across the alley.

“Waddya think?” asks Les, who is back on the scene.

“Fishy,” says Alby. “It’s more likely that they will go out on a bang and aim to take us, the scene managers, with them.”

Les and company gather in the alley to hear next morning's prayers. The Fakir goes on a bit with what sounds like a moderately toned ramp.

"What's he saying?" Alby asks. Alby is thoughtful. "Did you ever see Leslie Howard in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'?" he asks Les.

"Umm...yes...so?" Les says.

The insurgents troop out of the building, arms held over their heads at arm's length and proceed to the point where they begin to stack their weapons. It's like a scene from the end of the American Civil War, where the Rebels stacked arms.

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy-Four

"I rather think," Alby says as he listens to the Fakir's rant and looks at the men stacking arms, "that this paraphrases James Brudenell – Lord Cardigan, where he barks, 'close up the ranks there' then more softly, 'steady the Light Brigade'. These bastards are being revved up to attempt a Balaklava type charge."

He hands Les a Mossberg shotty. "It's ready to go. If they charge, aim at their midribs, that's where the suicide bombs will be."

The men, arms stacked, break into a run and come at a fast clip towards Les and company in the alley. Shots from the Mossberg, loaded with No 9 shot, immediately cause the suicide bombs to detonate – far enough away to cause no casualties. With the 8 men on the ground, Alby takes an RPG and blasts the 'porta-loo' where the Fakir is locked away. It goes up like a Roman candle.

Les looks at Alby. "Was that necessary?" he asks.

"Don't worry," Alby says. "That chap instigated and encouraged what has happened. Perhaps he is busy now with his black-eyed virgins."

Les says, "Well that part wraps up this squalid little siege, but just starve the others out, Alby. They'll probably blow themselves up a bit further down the track, but their coach is now out of the game and they may just chuck it in."

Thus Les returns to Canberra to attend to delayed matters.

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy-Five

While Les has been down at Salamanca Place directing a serious retaliatory action, his old former associates in the Labour Party have cut him no slack. They refused to grant him a pass while he was absent from Federal Parliament and with the help of several Senate recalcitrant, have rammed through a bill for a Royal Commission into Banking. While Les is not into banking in Oz, his Timor bank, the Agricultural and Industrial Bank based in Maubisse, lends big to Australian banks, mainly to keep their Housing Finance Divisions up and running. There will no doubt be a big effort to link Les's bank, which after all is wholly owned by Les's Australian company, Ballarat Gold South, into this planned scrutiny of the banking system.

He sets up a meeting well out of the scene with his Timor manager, Tom Davis, in Capetown to put together a strategy to combat what is going down. They are enjoying a Lucullan little meal at the Cape of Good Hope Hotel, views onto the rolling ocean and are sampling some of the very excellent Cape Province wines along with grilled crayfish starters. They are having also, an occasional fiery Cape Province brandy shooters as they go. They move on to a rack of South African lamb, basted with rosemary and thyme with magnificent baked veggies.

"It's like this, Tom," Les says as they chomp away with appreciation of the offering. "The Banking Commission will be a very shitty little war. We are secondary targets of course as they are really after our ex Banker Prime Minister, but they will of course make every opportunity to bring us in on the claims and no doubt will try to bring out our connection with the Missouri Bank, which has Mob connections. In fact it's owned by the Gambinis in Chicago."

"They are smart bankers all the same," Davis says. "And they, after all, are all tickety-boo with the US Banking laws."

"Yes," says Les. "And those boys are world beaters in putting up a smokescreen and under the cover of that, rubbing out any witness that is getting too near to the bone."

"So what's the game plan, Les," Tom asks.

"In essence, there's only two of us in our foxhole," Les says, "and our strategy is simple – just talk a lot and say nothing."

"But direct questions?" Tom asks.

"Easy to handle, but only in very general terms," Les replies. "We point out we are a competent entity operating under seal of approval of the Timor Government and that we simply marshal up funds from around the big wide world and lend these only to the Oz big banks, mainly to keep the housing market rolling there. We are not obliged to reveal how much we have invested in the market and can plead Bankers confidentiality. We will warn the big banks that if they reveal the amount we lend them, we will, for our own protection, stop lending to them the same day if they reveal figures."

Tom nods. "Understandable and understood," he says. "We don't have to tell lies, but under our sweetheart deal with Timor, which guarantees secrecy of detail, we will have ample opportunity to fray the edges a little."

Les says, "I might try a bit of old Abe Lincoln's philosophy on them - ie, in banking terms, things may come to those who wait – but only things left over by those who hustle."

"Touché," says Tom. "I'll just continue the type of conversation I've been having with my wife for 62 years now, ie, talk a lot, but say nothing."

"That's what I said when we started on the lamb," Les says.

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy-Six

Les is in a bit of an odd situation both with Ballarat South Gold and the Timor Bank. None of the huge amounts of dosh involved in both enterprises is really Les's property. It is all or most of it belonging to his missing mentors, Tun and Angelo. They were also his employers. To add to this, despite these chaps having gone missing, Les suspects they were on their way to Russia to pursue grey money affairs and were flying under false names on Malaysian Flight 370, the long missing one.

Faced with a huge pile of money of which he spent 3 years on their behalf stashing in deep hidey holes around the world's banking system, Les has kept it moving and has done this with care and under the overriding factor that should these mystery men resurface, he can honestly substantiate his management of the money on their behalf. Of course Les is entitled in his own right to money coming from their West Australian open pit gold mine and of course he has his Ministerial salary coming in every week from his duties in Federal Parliament. Under the franchise arrangement entered into by Tun and Angelo, in the far flung grey trade, money is

still rolling in to banks in Cyprus and Helsinki and Les will soon have to personally go and move some of this perhaps into gold exchanges, perhaps into discreet Swiss banks. He hasn't decided. There is also the matter of the unopened bank vault in the old bank in Glenferrie Road, occupied by Tun's security company, a company still running along well under management.

The Banking Royal Commission though, occupies a deal of his thinking time. His bank was started by Ballarat Gold South under Les's direction, but to the world, the only person representing, running and managing the Agricultural and Industrial Bank at Maubisse is Tom Davis. Tom, in actual fact, only makes decisions after Les has told him what to do. The Crime and Corruption Commission, while in actual fact coming under Les's eagle eye as Minister for the Interior, are strictly on their own hook keeping close tabs on Les. They hate his guts and are very pissed off that their big and active team of gum-shoes can't get a bead on him.

But like all investigative groups, they sit on their backsides and rely on computers to find out what is going on. Les, for his part, deeply distrusts computers, mobile phones, copper wire phones, Twitter, Facebook and all modern addictions of modern communication. All his instructions with Tom are viva voce. They meet up around the world quarterly. Sometimes in Brisbane, sometimes Capetown, more recently in Iceland. No written notes are taken from such meetings, thus their affairs progress prosperously and efficiently.

Lately, Les has been doing a bit of business with Singapore banks and they now are the only banks outside of Oz that he allows interbank loans with, at favourable rates. He is doing this to find an outlet for the money the Gambinis, through their Missouri Bank, are streaming to him. All this is very discreetly handled. The Singapore charge calls on Les personally to put together money arrangements to go back to Singapore. Nothing written changes hands. In fact the CCC are most likely totally unaware of the new money channel Les has opened simply by calling on the biggest bank in the City State and going on from there.

Les remarks later to Tom Davis that the City State is running things a whole lot better than the Oz Government is running Oz.

"Perhaps, Les," Tom says, "we should adopt their management style."

"I would, I would," Les says, "but there is a prerequisite."

"What's that?" Tom asks.

Les chuckles a malicious little chuckle. "Ah...we'd have to work out how we could discreetly shoot all those pinko's running the ABC," he says.

"Ah...," says Tom, "you mean the GAY BC. Why don't you do what you did to the NSW Arts Council when you were Minister in charge and cut off their funding?"

Les laughs. "This indeed is a recurring idea by our present Government..."

"Of which," Tom interjects, "you are a member."

"As you say," Les replies, "but I do like having the ABC Classical FM in my life. One needs a bit of classical music from time to time in order to reflect and absorb some of the rare better things in life."

Tom laughs. "Leslie," he says, "so far as I can see your musical perception is surely aligned to that of the Wentworth song which goes 'NEVER LET A CHANCE GO BY, GO BY, NEVER LET A CHANCE GO BY.'"

"Are you insinuating I'm a chancer?" Les asks.

"Not at all, not at all," Tom replies. "But you have to admit, your life to where you are at this point of time, is quite extraordinary for a nightclub bouncer."

"Touché," says Les. "But I do hope to get a bit further yet. There must be more windmills to tilt at out there."

“Undoubtedly,” Tom says. “And in that context my wife tells me that female friends or more correctly friends of friends say that your LANCE is unquestionably in good strong shape.”

Les relaxes. “Well old mate, so far so good. I don’t have to get on the famed Viagra.”

Tom chuckles. “Oh that is really out of date nowadays. An old friend of mine is now on Woolworths Raggedy Goat Weed.”

“What does he say about it?” Les asks.

“Um...according to him and it might be a tall tale, as he was in his working life in the advertising game – he claims to have run his wife ragged and her widowed sister and last I heard of him, he was up in the Cross scouting around.”

Their dessert arrives along accompanied by some excellent Cherry brandy. Les looks at the offering. It’s a deep dish apple pie. Tom raises his eyebrows.

“Well, Les,” he says, “Deep down you still have the common touch and once in a while, you eat what ordinary people may perhaps eat.”

“Oh Tom,” Les says, “We are common people after all.”

“Total bullshit, Les,” Tom says. “You are a mysterious mega rich big lump that has shown extraordinary foresight in never cluttering up your life with a wife and tin lids. By and large, heaps of ripe healthy women have looked at you with considering eyes. But mate, if you were a fox, the bitch pack would never have run you to earth.”

Les chuckles. “Marriages on my observation do tend to run their courses and pall. However, one of the smartest men I know married a convent girl and he told me recently that after 62 years of married life, his wife isn’t a pound heavier and is still as good in bed as she was when he was courting her.”

“A rare exception,” Tom says. “Anyway, my wife thinks you are the berries. You’ve taken me and her as well from the placid existence of retirees to fame and fortune as International Bankers, who now suddenly get, out of the blue, invitations to US President Inaugurations.”

Les decided not to prick Tom’s balloon. He knows quite well that Theo Lamont and his less than legal connections have the power to direct the Illinois vote in Presidential elections, hence the inclusion of Les and his nominees on the guest list for some of the most sought after events in this wide world.

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy-Seven

Like the proverbial juggler, Les always has a few balls in the air. He has Paul Kelly, the investigator who digs dirt on politicians full time for him, with any spare time going into checking on other players in various fields that are of interest to Les. The NSW Police Commissioner, Lou Caccano, also has a deep interest across the board and interesting stuff dug up by him and his staff gets to Les from time to time. The AFP, though concentrating on drug runners and the ‘rag heads’, do once in a while come up with something interesting dirt here and there.

Les keeps out of the Parliamentary head kicking in the main. He is something of a believer in the maxim espoused by the late George Bernard Shaw, who famously said, ‘I often deeply regret the things I didn’t say’. However, when members of his old Party (Labour) have the Government really on the run, which they seem to be doing regularly of late, he slips a few pearls of inside dirt garnered on Labour, not to the chief head-kicker, but to the Deputy Whip, who doesn’t get much of a look in from the Party. Thus, Dennis Faith-Jones, a good strong speaker,

in fact an incisive speaker, is locked and loaded and Les has a word with Malcolm, who as PM has to be there at Question Time when his natural inclination is to hide behind benches and Malcolm overrides the Manager of Government Business and puts Dennis up in Prime Time to demolish one or more of the Labour side.

By showcasing Dennis's natural oratorical skill, the Party have come to realise that this occasional thrower of jagged jests and javelin thrower type focussed attacks on the Labour Front Bench is a must have for the front bench in the next reshuffle. But it's not to be. Sadly he comes to a very sticky end in a car crash on the Gold Coast Freeway. It's an accident totally caused by a bloke known only too well by the cops as a recidivist road rager par excellence.

As a fellow Queensland member of the Front Bench, the PM gives Les the guernsey to represent the Government at the member's funeral. Thus Les gets more than somewhat involved in two events, which fortunately only one of which goes on National television. Les, along with Choristers from St Stephens Cathedral, ones he shared a rather boozy and amicable lunch with up at Eves on the River in days past – they are very chuffed to see Leslie again. They sing in three parts Gustav Faure's famous song - 'What is Life Without You' – as an integral part of the Eulogy that Les is tasked with and which gets run on National TV in the news.

The second event, fortunately not televised or even caught on security cameras, is where Les and Alby shadow the culprit, out on undeserved bail, from outside Jupiter's when he sets out driving (quite illegally) in the direction of Fortitude Valley. They cause him to stop and wearing dark clothes, gloves and hefting steel jemmy bars make sure and certain that the culprit will not be walking around anywhere for a few months. What Les and Alby do is indeed very high risk, but Les is a great believer in doing his own dirty work, albeit with a trusted helper, when justice is called for.

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy-Eight

Having operated out of Sydney both as the State Member for Lang and more lately as a Senator from NSW, Les is now the Liberal Member for Maryborough and Wide Bay, so has shifted his official electorate office to Maryborough. His staff has to some extent been provided by the Bureaucracy and aren't up to much. However one of the last calls he gets at his old office is from an intelligent sounding girl, a funeral co-ordinator at Maryborough for Slough & Stowe, at that centre.

He doesn't take many calls personally, but she catches him on the hop near closing time.

"Mr Les," she says, "Minister Extraordinaire, I want to send you an email. If you promise to read it, I'll press send now. If you can't promise that we'll never converse again ever."

Les is bemused. "Go for it, girl," he says and she does.

In short the email succinctly reads that Les should come in 12 minutes early to a major funeral scheduled in eight days time. She lists off three people he should talk to briefly and sends a draft of a short eulogy he may be inclined to give if he comes. It's so positive, he follows her suggestion chapter and verse and thus meets and appreciates Marie-Louise Pendleton, a tallish and slim girl with a firm gaze and he thinks a sort of twinkle in her blue eyes. She doesn't muck around and what she has set out is mint stuff. As he is about to leave he catches her eye and beckons.

"I'd like to talk to you. Do you ever come to Sydney?"

“Sunday fortnight why not come to lunch at my holiday place at Mt Wilson?”

“Perhaps....Okay,” he says and does.

He gets a surprise when he puts his car down a gear to go up her steep driveway at the top of which is a blue painted weather-board cottage. He pulls up and Marie-Louise comes down the steps to greet him. With her is a strong-faced fellow using a stick.

“Give us your car keys, Minister,” she says, “and Ryan here will drive your car down to Katoomba and park it in the big car park and bring it back when we ring his mobile.”

“Why so?” Les asks.

“It’s got a detection finder (a bug) on it. It might be best if those that placed it there don’t read this as a scheduled stop. Besides, Ryan is due for a silver service lunch and a beer or two as I owe him.”

“Okay,” says Les. “How do you know about the bug? I know of course it’s there, but I didn’t think our meet and greet today would be of any significance, so I used the car today that it’s fitted to instead of hiring an oldie.”

“At this point, Minister, it has no significance, but if what I suggest today has any appeal, it will become significant.”

The girl is wearing long shorts, a striped shirt buttoned just enough to be eye-catching and sling-back sandals. They sit on the rear deck and she serves up a couple of champagne cocktails, a couple of brandy shooters and some American beer to wash it all down with. She dashes back and forth just a bit and in no time they’re sitting down to a mini lamb roast that she has cooked to a turn and cut in half and served up with a baked sweet potato covered with a rich brown gravy. Les is a practised trencher man and appreciates and enjoys her offering. They proceed to a very appealing sweet course, covered with cream.

“What the hell is this?” Les asks as he savours it.

“No big deal,” she replies. “It’s from the local Vietnamese Bakery, French in origin and is called simply a Bee Sting.”

“Well,” Les says, “you, Marie-Louise, can feel free to sting me any old time, right after coffee and brandy chasers.” He leers at her suggestively.

“Come now, Mr Les,” she says, “you know as well as me that sex on a first date is never a good idea.”

“I beg to differ,” Les says. “You are picture perfect and I think it’s a brilliant idea.”

“I don’t rule it in or out,” she says, “but let’s get some business out of the way first.”

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy-Nine

Marie-Louise is now all business. She pours chilled mineral water in Gregorian flutes and they adjourn to a small library.

“About Ryan,” she says. “Ex-military intelligence in ‘rag head land’, hip wounded, smart as a whip, in training to be an Army Chaplain for which he is well fitted. We use him at the funeral home for grief counselling. He sees the big picture and has a very good brain. Now...as to your question on how I got into the funeral business. My first husband and I married at a nuptial Mass in Maryborough, but it didn’t take him long to clean me out financially. Not by stealing my money, but by buying a fine house we couldn’t afford and the bank took it back. Hubby No 2, I

married by Celebrant service, had to as the rigid old Micks won't marry a divorced woman. Next up, my new hubby, who ran adventure services out of Hervey Bay, left life in a bad boating mishap. I've never been with a man since as I seem to bring nothing but grief to those I've been entangled with. But I'm not averse to another try – but not this afternoon as I can't have old Ryan sitting forever in the Katoomba car park."

"Aww," says Les (who topped English in High School). "Waddya want?"

"Well..." she slowly says, "I want to tell you a bit about the lengths the CCC are going to cause you grief, although they nominally report to you as Minister and I want you to do something about the Ice age purveyors up in Hervey Bay who are ruining quite promising youth. Ryan has looked quite intelligently into both of these matters. He's reported back viva voce. I've short-handed what he has found out and here's the hard copy. You and only you could action the remedial side if you felt inclined to."

"Just a minute," Les says. He's a trained speed reader. "Umm..." he says, "there's enough here, beautifully printed, to put a bomb into the two groups you are interested in and yes – I'll be happy to throw it. You're short-hand versed."

"Hmmm," says Marie-Louise, "that's how I got my job. The funeral home people are not into religion at all, at all. So from the moment they get tasked with a funeral, the older partner sets out the costs and this agreed, the younger one practically camps with the deceased person's family until he has sucked the life details quite dry. He then whistles me up and I put it all in writing from my short-hand instructions and write Stowes' speechifying bits. What I write," she continues, "has to be quite long as the man running the show has to fill in a respectable amount of time and doesn't have the benefit of what most have, ie St Paul's letters to the Corinthians or similar, to pad out his little talk. Having in effect totally ignored the promise of an after-life, he has to extemporise on what has been in the guest of honour's life."

"I'm rather amazed," Les says, "at the growth of the non-church funeral homes, if you can call them that. Big capital is going into something that is already catered for by the churches and their priests, pastors and so on."

"It's to do with one stop shopping, Les," she says. "Better medication and more aware life styles as pushed on the all-pervasive TV means people are living much longer and thus dying later. This also means those attending funerals at conventional churches have to get themselves to the Church, then stumble around some Cemetery and then to totter back to some Church Hall or District Club for the Wake. It's too much movement and too much time consuming and also, it exposes funeral goers to the vagaries of the outside weather. Most of the new type send-offs publish that a private cremation will take place at a later date. In actual fact, by the time those attending the funeral are seated, the guest of honour is in a plywood casket sitting in the wait line for an after-hours (and thus much cheaper) fires of Moloch."

"But the ashes?" Les queries.

"They turn up smartly," she says, "but there's no guarantee the Urn contains the guest of honour. Ashes are ashes, very alike and unidentifiable."

"Well," Les fairly asks, "who is in the flash casket nicely on view?"

"Usually some weighted bags of sand," she says. "Later, the casket is revarnished to present a different outside and put back in stock."

"Hmmm," says Les, "and it seems to work."

“Like a German Band,” Marie-Louise says, “God never gets a mention and only occasionally is there a hymn on the sound system. But don’t worry, Les. It’s all a passing phase. It’s like the late lamented Drive-In Movie Theatres.”

“What will replace the newbies?” Les asks.

“Without a doubt – Online funerals – where the only person leaving home is the guest of honour. Talking of drive-in theatres,” Marie-Louise continues, “I once was in a huge Dodge car with a party of three girls and three blokes and we were so taken up with the minister’s daughter having a threesome in the confines of an Austin A40 next door. We found all the action was in that car, not at all on the screen.”

Les gets on with things and also calls on Ryan for a talk. Ryan suggests that a few red herrings properly laid would get the CCC running around like rats on a treadmill and properly handled and with a few smart press leaks this could see the CCC funding closely looked at and by and large would distract them no end.

Les rouses up the drug purveyors in no uncertain fashion and while it remains a seemingly intractable problem the scale of dealers and dealing is decimated and Les does a big follow up on the decimation which encourages those that escaped the net to move on to other parts promptly.

Old Donald Trump moves into the White House about this time and alarm and despondency seems to result from this in the Hamilton Club on a Friday night when Les is there having a pint or two.

“Trump doesn’t know what he’s doing,” one drinker says.

Les chuckles. “Well, he’s sure got good taste in good looking women,” he says. “He’s got poor old Malcolm on the run over the crazy idea to rehouse the Manus Island dwellers (who burnt all their papers before coming ashore) in the US of A.”

Another says, “Don’t worry fellows, it’s only a matter of time before someone pots the old rogue.”

“I hope not,” says Les. “The possible replacements don’t look too promising to me.”

Chapter One Hundred and Eighty

Les knows he needs a bit more perception and brain power in his Maryborough office. Marie-Louise is not interested in joining the Maryborough office staff, but after a deal of importuning, she agrees to take over his appointments secretary duty. This means no one can get to speak one on one with Les unless she pencils such an appointment in. He brings in Ryan as a back-up man to listen to electors problems that in the main he dictates to Marie-Louise who short-hands these and if they are in need of further attention, she types out, changes the typewriter ribbon at the end of each day and never leaves the office until the ribbons are burnt. This system means both she and Ryan have to move around a bit to put key details together without using a computer. Les has a shredder close to hand and shreds much of what he is given after absorbing the content.

He comes into his unofficial office in Pitt Street one Tuesday.

Marie-Louise says, “One Target Jones wants to meet up with you. I think it’s a conversation you should have.”

Target is a Redfernite who, over the years has effectively carried out some dirty work for Les here and there. Target arrives for his appointment. Les, as a goodwill gesture, starts off the conversation by giving Target a bottle of Grange

Hermitage. The actual Grange contents are long gone, but Les has the bottle refilled and recorked with a very good Peter Lehmann red and Target wouldn't know the difference anyway. But he appreciates the gesture no end.

"What have you got for me?" Les asks. Target is, of course, an original Australian and unmistakably so.

"I have a nephew," he says. "He's light coloured and he's a member in good standing of the Penrith chapter of the Red Dogs. The word he passes to me is that a contract of extraordinary size is around to pot you, Leslie my old china plate. Geez, you're such a big sized target, that I thought it best to inform you. This is serious stuff."

"You don't know where the offer is coming from?" Les asks.

"Logically," says Target, "it should be the Lebanese whose cash flow has been dented by your comb-out of dealers in Banana land."

"But you're not saying it's them."

"No," says Target. "That its common knowledge on the streets in Redfern tells me clearly that it's an amateur behind it. By good rights if it was professionally inspired, the first you would hear on the streets would be after the shot is fired and the money on offer is so good, a shot will be fired unless you can draw the teeth on whoever is behind this rather stupid idea. If the target was old Malcolm the PM," he continues, "I wouldn't be here telling you about it."

"You don't like Malcolm?" Les asks.

Target chuckles. "It's rumoured," he says, "that even his wife can't stand him."

They sit back and Les sends out for a Big Mac cheeseburger and they sip Becks stubbies and munch the cheese offering for a while. The Prime Minister rings.

Les says to the message carrier, "Just tell him that I'm closely engaged at the moment and will ring back when I've finished."

But sharp old Leslie takes the information Target has walked in with very seriously. He whistles up Alby and they drive over to Manly to where the Bikie boss, that has been hijacking truckloads of booze for years for the Kelly Club and associate ventures, generally lunches midweek with some of his bikie boys. Eddie, the boss, who looks like John Laws in his prime, only more solid, bearded, muscly, lamps them the minute they walk in.

"Ah..." Eddie says, "The gunslinger/doorman and his mate, the other. Waddyawant?"

"A private word, Eddie," Les says.

"Not here," says Eddie, "but we can find a place."

"You're extra cautious," Les says.

"Umm..." the fuzz have sourced directional microphones of exceptional clarity and range. In short, these days' conversations in public places have to be just that – conversations of no import, ie plenty of piss and wind. I'm sure Leslie, you and the other you take my meaning."

Les finally meets up with Eddie a day or three later at a disused brickworks on the Bathurst road. "Why here?" Les asks.

Eddie has a belly laugh. "I've got a bit of a bike collection," he says, "including two Harley Davidsons, which are last of their products fitted with carburettors. I have to give them a run from time to time and this fitted in."

Les looks over the bikes, one in particular. It's quite impeccable, being British Racing green in main colour and loaded up with chrome, typical of old Harleys. It's quite an eye catcher. It's also got leather pannier pouches. Les is sure and certain

that there would be at least a sawn off shotgun and perhaps an old but efficient Schmeisser machine pistol and probably some flash-bang grenades in these.

They sit on a part pack of Sandstock bricks while Les gets out of the Berlina boot, a compact looking drone. He flies this off to see what he can see. It's an excellent look at what's around and they have a quiet look at a bitch fox playing with her cubs among the many bricks. They are quite amused with this.

"Okay," Eddie says. "We're on our 'Pat Malone', so shoot."

Les outlines what Target has told him. Eddie looks at Les as he unfolds the assassination rumour.

"I doubt, Leslie," he says, "if there is any substance in this. If there were, I would have heard the whisper – and I haven't. But, like the sleazy young farmer at the last Bathurst Bachelor and Spinsters Ball as he was escorting the young city girl, already half out of her dress in the direction of his beaut ute, said, 'I'm certainly not a gynaecologist, but I'm very prepared to look into it'. And," he continues, "I will look into it and report back in due course."

A double cabber white ute mouses into the brick yard. A man in a ranger type uniform gets out. Eddie tenses, reaches into his leather jacket, palms out a flat pistol, holds it down his leg. But it all seems harmless as he re-pockets the pistol.

"May I ask," the chap says, "what you are doing here? Its private property."

Eddie says, "It's actually none of your business, but we are about to share a whisky or two and a packet of ham sandwiches. You can join us for that or quietly mizzle off."

Les pours three shooters of cognac and they have a chat.

Come July and the Parliamentary winter recess, Les calls in his Chief of Staff, a chap that privately Les thinks is of much use as tits on a bull.

"I'll be away for a while," Les says, "and due to the nature of the ministry I run, dramas will occur. The big thing is to avoid knee-jerk reactions."

"So?" the man asks.

"Do nothing," Les says, "without consulting Marie-Louise."

"Why should I, as Chief of Staff, seek guidance from a girl who is only your appointment secretary?"

"In short," Les says, "in my own considered opinion, that same girl has more perception and political nouse than the entire Federal Cabinet, whom I unfortunately have to spend a lot of time listening to. Now....I've told you what to do and if you neglect to follow that instruction, it will be very much at your peril."

Chapter One Hundred and Eighty-One

During the current month, the US Cultural Attaché has been around to Les on behalf of the Chicago Gambinis teeing up a meet and greet between Les and Theo Lamont. The crime family have concern at the up-coming Royal Commission on Banking and seem to want a bit of a talk about the possible ramifications of this. Thus a week later finds Les walking around the Close of Salisbury Cathedral. He's arrived along early for the meet and at the spot where he is scheduled to meet Lamont, a painter is busy doing a very good painting of the fine house once lived in, in his declining years by Edward Heath, the former British PM and of 'Morning Cloud' yachting fame. He looks closely at the dauber and at what she is producing. He is suspicious of anyone on hand at a major meet and greet, but relaxes when he scans the quality of her efforts. If she paints like this, she isn't a shooter Les decides.

Theo and his minders turn up at the rendezvous. Theo seems to always dress to fit in where they are meeting, be it on Hampstead Heath or the Ritz. But his minders, sharp faced, Italian looking, always sport very sharp suits. Perhaps Theo doesn't mind advertising that he comes with bodyguards. Who knows what mobsters think.

Les imparts to Theo that he is not too perturbed by the Royal Commission. They can't really get any information out of a bank based in Timor, even if the man behind it lives in Oz. Just at the moment, the bank lends only in Oz on loans to big banks, loans secured by promissory notes from them. There isn't a lot of meat on any bone the Royal Commission digs up. But there are down the track ramifications when the Timor Bank starts redeeming their interbank loans in Australia and then starts buying Oz real estate. But, as Les tells Theo, this is down the track stuff and is not scheduled to kick in for a while yet, by which time the dust of the Royal Commission may have settled a bit.

They part amicably and Les goes down to Middle England to have a look at Wells Cathedral, the screen front of this has always intrigued him, but up until now, he has never inspected it. He works his way up to Yorkshire by various trains and latish twilight sees him returning from the Pontefract races and getting off the Leeds train onto a long platform of the subsidiary station to change trains. Also getting off to do the same is an ebullient gang of about six youths and a nice looking thirtyish girl. It's an untended station, but information is relayed to the platform by loudspeakers from Leeds Central.

Thus they are told the train they are sweating on to get them over to Normanton has been cancelled, but another will be along in 90 minutes to get them to their planned destinations. This is going to be much later than suits Leslie, the little gang are pushy and mouthy.

The leader says loudly, "Perhaps we can get a decent donation off the old gentleman here and we can walk to the nearest pub and fill in time there."

Les backs into the brick wall of the station and gestures to the woman to do the same. He doesn't want anyone getting behind him. Les has brought with him from Oz, a stout bit of white gum branch which he has had a machinist turn down a cap for this and a ferrule for the top. The top has a nice slope which comes to hand very well. It's the reason he picked up this bit of branch in the first place and he's tailored and sawn the stick neatly. It's a bit knobbly and a cross between a staff and a cudgel. He leans it a bit against his leg and disarms things a bit by getting out a panatela and a taper and lighting it up. It clearly demonstrates that the gang are not getting him worried.

"What about it old boy?" they say. "Are you willing to buy us off or shall we leave you a bleeding heap on the ground while we give the lovely lady here a thorough molesting?"

Les looks them up and down. "You look like a bunch of bleeding virgins," he says. "I doubt you could molest anybody anytime."

They take umbrage at this and move closer in a ring around him. Les puffs out some aromatic smoke and gives them a mild look.

"Well," he says, "to save the lady embarrassment, I'm prepared to spring you twenty pounds to send you harmlessly in the direction of the pub."

"Geez, Squire," the leader says, "You're hopelessly out of touch. Twenty pounds will only buy us a few pints. We need money for shooters as well you know or if you weren't so old you would know."

Out the side of his mouth, Les says to the girl, "Take your shoes off." She does and asks, "Now what?"

"At the first blow, run as if you are in the Olympics," he says, "and don't look back. I don't win every war I get into."

The girl chuckles. "Gawd and my aunt sally," she says, "you're the most interesting male I've crossed paths with for years."

The leader moves closer, too close for his own good to Les.

"It's one hundred pounds up front now, Squire," he says.

Les chuckles. "You've priced yourself out of the market," he says. "Now my offer is withdrawn and before you get yourself and your mates into a full on shit storm, I suggest you walk away empty handed to the pub."

The leader pulls out a flick knife as does two of the gang. Les straightens up, grasps his stick and strikes like a cobra, left hands a smashing blow into the chap's collarbone.

"Run," he says to the girl. She hares off like a runner out of the blocks. Les wipes out the other knife holders, pauses in mid swing. "You can run too," he says. "Its good advice you'll find if you stay." They hare off. Les gets into the fallen one.

"Might as well break a few ribs," he says. The girl who ran is now back hefting two house bricks she has sourced from work being done further down the platform, hands one to Les, swings the other in her hand.

"It's like the charge of the light brigade," Les says. "We're at the guns and it would be best now to retire before the Panda cars arrive and spoil our evening. Just tuck your arm in mine and try to look harmless. Best drop that brick and we'll walk along like a courting couple and avoid scrutiny."

"It should work," she says. "I've bricked the CCTV cameras while I was picking up these couple of loose bricks that I thought we may need."

At the station steps, Les gestures downhill into Wakefield. "Do you see the tall Cathedral spire?" he says.

"Uh huh," the girl replies.

"That's our sighter and the bus station is two blocks this side. We can bus to Normanton if that is your destination. It's certainly mine."

The wait for the Normanton bus is only short. Les grabs a couple of cappuccinos and a pork pie and cup of chips from the station food bar and they chat amicably on the longish bus trip back to Normanton.

"Fancy a beer at the Black Swan?" he asks. Les is known here and they enjoy a pint and they part.

"Les," she says, "I'd absolutely love to spend more time with you, but I have a fascinating story thanks to you, to share with a very possessive husband. So we have to behave like two ships in the night and push on into the trackless ocean."

"Give us your address, love," he says, "and if you're ever in Oz land, I'll be very disappointed if you don't give me a ring."

And she does as it turns out two years later when her hubby is playing cricket at the MCG for England.

The evening of the fracas at the railway station Les reflects on the day. He's a veteran of many clashes during his time as the doorman at the Kelly Club, usually involving head butts, rabbit killers, broken jaws, much kicking with his solid Oxfords and so on. All of it up close and personal. Because today he was carrying a solid stick with him he had totally wiped out his attackers by using the said stick skilfully. He had dealt with the threat effectively and the bit of severe kicking he gave the

Leader wasn't strictly necessary – 'cream on the cake' Les thinks. It's all been a bit different.

Chapter One Hundred and Eighty-Two

Peter Mua has been in touch with Les via Tom Davis at the Timor Bank. All of that nefarious back and forthing to set up the bank initially has been one on one. Peter has traded off a beautiful lake front villa in Geneva in exchange for the banking licence. The lending of grey money into big Oz interbank loans, which they use for financing part of their house lending programmes suits the Milwaukee Bank owners, to whit the Gambini crime family in Chicago. It's been a big step in getting their somewhat illegal profits nicely tucked away and insulated from the very Squizzy IRS people in the US.

Recent reviews of how well this has been going have led to the suggestion of another sweetener being structured as a gift to Peter Mua for his invaluable help. Les has researched the possibility of gifting their helper with a well tenanted office building in Lausanne as a very decent sweetener. The general idea is that the bank will purchase the building and will structure an ownership entity that makes the gift watertight, but as near as impossible to trace back to Peter. It's all a bit tricky and they have settled on a structure based on bearer bonds which are as fire-proof as is financially possible.

Peter is impressed with their efforts, especially as it's a gift without strings. Les and Theo simply want Peter cemented into their deal on a long term basis. They are building up goodwill to keep their banking asset as safe and sound as they can make it. A good deal of what they have been doing has been sub rosa due to the simplicity of the lending into the big Oz banks in exchange for promissory notes safely warehoused in London at the Bank of England. Only Les, the Lamonts and their man on the ground three days a week in Timor, Tom Davis, know the detail.

There is so much grey money floating around the world that Tom takes it in interest free at the bank against when opportunity occurs to feed it into the Oz banks. There is a limit on how much he can get into Oz without arousing suspicion. Their biggest problems stem from shady investors from Indonesia who insist on dumping very substantial funds in the Timor Bank, albeit with no promises of Oz placement by Tom. He and Les have looked a number of times at whether they should dump this unwanted build-up of funds into the short term money market in Oz. It's very tempting, but there is a limit to Tom's time in micro managing this should they go into the market. Such a move would necessitate more key staff to handle a more volatile portfolio.

"Nuh," says Les, "no one at all can look into what we are very successfully doing at present and I want to keep it that way."

Peter, through his accountancy practise, acts as agent for the Timor Bank and handles the local people loans and repayments into which the bank tips one and a half million a year without any great hopes of recovering the money, but to their collective surprise, repayments are holding up. Their banking license for their intrepid bank has a sunset clause in it coming into effect ten years after start up.

Peter suggests that as this money is coming back to the bank in dribs and drabs and is not the lost cause they expected it to be and the Bank is becoming to be seen as a valuable help to the very local locals, it's possible if Les and Tom can increase the annual amount for local lending substantially, there is a very fair chance

he can get the Government to delete the sunset clause. It's an idea that he thinks will need a bit of time to get through, but as he says, if he floats the idea and it gets known, more lending funds will follow and the Government would have to lean towards the idea.

With this very excellent idea now in the wind, Les suggests that as their interbank Oz loans are seemingly self-perpetuating, Tom should cut back his time in Timor to two days a week and spend the extra day relaxing at his Fanny Bay home in Darwin.

"Very generous, Leslie," he says.

"Not at all," Les says. "It's in our best interest to make our little bank exclusive. Who knows, soon we may be able to charge entry fees for those growing numbers who seem to want to invest with us."

Tom scribbles a few figures on a bit of paper.

"This, Les," he says, "is the sum total of money sitting here in Timor in our bank on which we are not paying a cent in interest. It's just in the queue hoping to get into the interbank lending cycle."

"Umm..." Les says. "There's probably no reason we can't just buy Government Bonds with this stagnant money. Give it some thought and if necessary, we can hire a bit of outside advice perhaps."

Les reflects a bit as he's sitting on an Air New Guinea flight to Port Moresby that Australia is still the land of opportunity when he, a night club bouncer, is now considering directing big money into his Nations Bond Book. Les continues to do business with Hiram at the Timber Bank, mainly with Royalty money coming in from the grey trade franchise agreement made by Tun and Angelo some time back and which is working effectively and prosperously.

He gets back into Oz on a Port Macquarie fishing charter boat and he chuckles at how this will confuse the not so sharp gum shoes at the CCC when they try and analyse where he's been during parliamentary winter recess. Les catches the train down to Gosford, sends a message via a bikie courier to Marie-Louise. They catch up for dinner that night at the Gosford Motor Inn. She gives him the real skinny on the many matters of much or little import that have taken place in his month away and more importantly perhaps, who has been around looking for him.

"I've missed you, you great lug," she says towards the end of the meal. "And I'm of a mind to give you a private welcome home party in my room."

This is a new element in Les's life and a very welcome one, as up 'til now Marie-Louise has kept him firmly at arm's length.

As they go up, Marie-Louise says, "Give me ten minutes Leslie and then come in, no need to knock."

Les decides he's no masher, but eleven minutes later, he pants in her door. Marie-Louise has turned down both the bed and the lighting, has a glass of champagne in each hand and is completely au naturel. She hands him his glass and pirouettes full circle. Les sips, he considers.

"I thought," he finally says, "you had a boyish figure. Where indeed were you hiding those magnificent and nicely separated knockers?"

"Flattening bras," she says. "Very much used I'm told in the roaring twenties."

"I never expected any offer from you," he says, "let alone such as I'm looking at now. What did bring this on?"

She gives him the most suggestive look he's ever received and he's had quite a few of these since he turned thirteen – he was always a boy bigger than his years.

"I watched on GEM last night," she says, "a very, very good remake of Lady Chatterley's Lover. These generally are mainly a sexual romp, but last night's one could have been directed by DH Lawrence himself. It was a very, very intellectual presentation and the sex scenes were just so suggestive and subtle, that I would have been receptive to an offer from a one-legged drunk, should one have been available when they started putting up the screen credits."

"Hmm, Marie-Louise," he says. "I'm about as subtle as a stallion in the mating stall, but let's stop talking and start acting."

"Aye, aye Sir," she says. "How and where do you want me?"

"Before we start," Les says, "I've been watching the Melbourne Tennis on Foxtel while I've been away."

"And...." she says.

"Well....the toss has favoured me no end. So I'll serve and you can receive." She looks at him with flashing eyes.

"Balls up," she says to end the conversation.

Chapter One Hundred and Eighty-Three

Les applies quite a bit of thought into making the Timor Bank as fire-proof as possible so far. The big money coming into the bank from Missouri Bank is generally sent via the Lamont private post office arrangement with the Diplomatic bag courier. It comes in in the way of bank drafts from a Delaware registered finance company in the form of bank drafts on a mix of banks. There are no wire transfers.

Similarly the monthly money the bank gives to Peter Mua Accountancy's practise to on-lend to the locals is walked around to Peter's office and consists of bank cheques on their own bank. The book-keeping within the bank proper is always done on old Burroughs Ledger Machines. There is, after all, only six banks they lend to on interbank lending in Australia. So it's a simple operation and easily run by Tom and a sound helper who has been made very aware of the danger of any leak from the bank of information. This chap gets a few approaches and always reports them.

Tom leans to transacting this and that by fax machines and he even has an old telex machine in use also. He is not fond of emails and generally replies to these very much by fax. In fact incoming emails flood into the bank and by slowing down return replies by the now very dated fax, he is actively damping down this unwanted traffic. Tom has a framed old-time Caxton type-set reminder on his office wall. It says, 'THE KISS METHOD IS BEST' and then in brackets, 'KISS – Keep It Simple Stupid'.

This is all working like a German Band and drives investigators trying to get a handle on what the bank is doing, mad. Especially as Tom and his helper use typewriters for much of what they are communicating and recent reports that the Russian Military have now reverted to these instead of computers, bears out their thought on this old fashioned, but effective communication channel.

In the current Parliamentary session, Les started out making a deal of constructive suggestions in Cabinet and in meetings with the neglected Back Bench. But in neither forum, bearing in mind the ego-centric nature of the Liberals, he gets a fair bit of intransigence reaction to his excellent ideas. 'Bugger it,' he thinks, 'why should I race my motor?', and embraces a somnolent approach for the rest of the term.

He has a few beers over lunch and often has a snooze during afternoon proceedings. When the Press pack start to notice this and to hassle him, he just says that the standard of debate overall is more of a soporific rather than an enlightening nature and that he is responding to this in kind. This confuses the press gallery quite a bit – as intellectual rather than topical subjects seem to do more times than not. But he wakes up later in the week when the Prime Minister is absent at a Droughtmaster Cattle sale in Longreach. The Prime Minister has to take a day out of the House to mend some fences with the tough and influential old cattlemen up there in cattle country.

Malcolm's Deputy PM doesn't handle the going as 'King Billy' for a day when he falls into a few well laid traps by the Leader of the Opposition. He flounders badly, thus opening the door to further punishment. To add to his woes, the Press gallery revel in his stumble and give him hell. Malcolm Naismith compounds his absence in getting caught up in a very unexpected weather event. He gets caught in the rain trying to get over a flash flooded creek, goes down with pneumonia as a result.

Les can see another pulverising Question Time coming up, so walks the corridors to the rarefied office of the Acting Prime Minister, pushes in the door without knocking. A harassed Deputy PM is a bit surrounded with bureaucrats and several advisors.

"Err Leslie," he says, "I haven't time to fit you in yet."

Les smiles a dark smile, gestures to the door and sweeps his arm over the visitors.

"Out," he says, "and be quick about it."

"Why?" asks one. Les fixes him with a steely glance.

"Rome is about to burn," he says, "and you mob of duckwits are no firemen, so piss off now." And they do.

The Deputy PM looks at Les hopefully. "We haven't been able to cobble up much of a defence," he says. "If you have better ideas, let's have them."

Les lays a foolscap sheet on the desk.

"Item one," he says. "Use the numbers to cancel Question Time after today until next week. Handle the listed questions in the way I describe, which by the way is exactly as our late lamented founder, Robert Gordon Menzies, followed when stuck for answers and allow me five questions without notice."

"And then what?" Barrington asks.

"Just sit back and watch the bastards run," Les says.

Thus the stand-in PM negotiates the postponement of Question Time despite the catcalls and goes on to answer the questions with notice using the formula –

"I have some of the facts that would allow me to answer these questions, but only in part. It would be best if I research the questions as a whole and will furnish written answers to the House in due course."

"When?" they ask.

Les stands up, surprises them all. "Five or six weeks would do it," he says. Les then cuts across the ensuing clamour from the Opposition by asking the first question without notice. Les now lays out questions sourced from the sterling dirt digging work done for him by Paul Kelly. They are really astounding questions, aimed like barbs, mostly at the Front Bench and a particularly nasty one to a prominent Back-Bencher, who is expecting promotion. This last question is such that the chap it is aimed at, who recently has been basking in his own glory, will have to swim hard to find an acceptable answer. Les sits down, the House is in an uproar

and the Leader of the Opposition wisely shuts his mouth and remains seated. The Acting PM walks with Les back to Les's office.

"Jesus, Leslie," he says, "those bastards will be so busy protecting their backsides under your onslaught, they'll be easy meat for at least a fortnight."

"Don't worry if they regroup, Barrington," Les says. "There are plenty more shots to come when they've got over this lot."

Les reflects on the plus and minus factors of being in a Coalition Government. The Deputy Prime Minister is quite at home on matters relevant to his Agriculture Portfolio and is a very decent chap, but like many Nationals, is easy meat to the old Trade Union versed denizens of Labour Opposition.

Chapter One Hundred and Eighty-Four

Malcolm Naismith returns to the House, a House much more subdued than when he left it.

"Geez, Leslie," he says, "Did you ever think about being a Lion Tamer?"

"Ah, Prime Minister," Les replies, "I'm more suited through my previous full-time job in club world to being a pimp rather than a Prime Minister."

"You're not carrying a Field Marshall's baton in your back-pack, Les?" he asks.

Les chuckles, produces a flat silver flask from his coat pocket.

"Settle down PM," he says. "Try a soothing drop of Bothwell Whisky."

They sip and plan together a few more shafts to fire at the Opposition.

"If you don't want to be Prime Minister, Les," Malcolm asks, "Why are you here?"

Les gives a big deep belly laugh. "Where else in this funny old country," Les says, "can you find a job in which you are paid and well paid at that, to hold a spot where, under Parliamentary privilege, you can throw buckets of shit over anyone you don't like or who is getting in your way, without being sued by hungry solicitors?"

"Touché," Malcolm (a lawyer in an earlier life) says. "As good a reason as I've ever heard articulated."

Chapter One Hundred and Eighty-Five

It's Easter Thursday and history is being made in Canberra. Both Houses are in full session following an offer by a 'God Botherer' in the all-powerful Cross Bench to lend his balancing vote to push through three bills from the Senate log jam. He hasn't specified what Bills he will support, has left it to Malcolm Naismith to choose. Old Malcolm, whose political capital probably is now showing a debit balance, has jumped at the opportunity to achieve something, anything in the way of new legislation. But the 'God Botherer' has made them sweat by nit-picking the odd clause here and there. To say the House is restless is putting it very mildly. The 'God Botherer' Senator holding the trump card is only down to attend the Catholic Church's feet washing ceremony that evening in nearby Queanbeyan, so time is on his side, leaving the many who hope to get home to their homes sometime tonight, sweating. The legislation finally passed in its original form sees members flooding out of the House to catch planes, totally ignoring the Prime Minister, who is on his feet wishing Easter wishes to his fast vanishing audience.

Les and Senator Clarrie adjourn to the House Bar and settle in for a longish session there, along with quite a few members who have given up on getting home tonight. As the coolish evening progresses and the drinkies flow well, Les with his fine bass voice (he is down to sing a solo at St Mary's Cathedral Saturday night), zips into the famous song from Cats – Billy McCall. Clarrie joins in on a piccolo. They are laying the surprisingly large crowd (the staffers from the House having been invited along) in the aisles as it were. Les holds his notes, singing 'Billy/y/Billy McCall' and brings it to a very crowd pleasing end. Malcolm comes over with fresh pints to Les and Clarrie.

"How do you see it?" he asks.

"Hmm...well....I expect you and I both will be here next Easter, but going on the blood bath in Western Australia, we won't be running the country anymore."

Malcolm chuckles. "Hold on, Les," he says, "we surely aren't running it now, those queer eggs in the Senate has the legislative say so really. What will you do, Les, if the polls are correct and we, the ostensible government, go down the gurgler?"

Les takes a deep pull on his pint. "Malcolm," he says, "I've built a career of sorts by changing sides and thus staying in power."

"So?" queries Malcolm.

"Hmm...I've had an offer from that funeral faced beggar to do that again and emerge as Treasurer."

"And?" Malcolm asks.

"I'm thinking about it," Les says. "I've always believed the only way to get real equity into our taxation system would be to bring in an overall flat tax."

"And will you try it?" Malcolm asks.

"It's tempting," Les says, finishes his pint in one long swallow. "My buy," he says and heads toward the Bar servery.

Watch out for the next 'Top of the Wazar' – Les Norton book – 'Balancing the Books'