Michael Marriott and his wife once crossed the Sahara in a twenty-year-old London taxi, and recounted their adventures in a book called *Desert Taxi*. Three years later the same urge for bizarre and cheap travel led them to set out together bound overland for Australia riding 'two-up' on a motor scooter.

Yugoslavia. Bulgaria. Turkey and Persia have roads, but in Afghanistan the road was usually nothing more than a humped and gullied track across a grim, almost deserted land of mountain ranges, sandstone ridges and bare, scorched villages. Every mile of travel in this country is a hazard, and with nothing but a scooter every hazard might have had serious results. Yet, after some unpleasant set-backs, the Marriotts emerged from Afghanistan and made their way through Pakistan and India, to Ceylon. Steamer took them to Adelaide, but the faithful scooter carried them round the eastern half of Australia and across to Melville Island, reserved for aborigines whom they had come to observe. This is a travel story of unusual character, told with humour and great vivacity.
On a cold, rainy morning in July my wife and I set out from England for the Australian Outback, with the sum total of our equipment stowed behind us in two pannier-bags and one valise. Beneath us, a little 150 c.c. engine pop-popped erratically. Other travellers, waiting to board the Dover cross-Channel ferry, waved our excessive exhaust fumes testily away from their noses.

'I say, old boy, switch that wretched thing off, will you? My wife's damned-near asphyxiated.' The driver of the open MG, complete with 'gorblimy' cap and large moustache, tapped me on the shoulder.

'Sorry,' I sympathized. 'But I must run-in the engine with plenty of oil. We've a big mileage ahead of us.'

Suddenly, the annoyance on his face splintered into a beaming smile. 'Good Lord! I saw you two on TV last night. Riding that midget all the way
to Australia, aren't you?'

'We're attempting to,' replied Nita cautiously, dismounting and stretching painfully.

'By Jove,' said the holiday-maker. 'I'd love to be coming with you, only I'm afraid the wife wouldn't wear it.' And he dashed back to his car as the line started moving up the ramp. As our rear view was again obliterated in clouds of smoke, Nita gave her behind a quick massage and mounted for the last time on English soil. She remarked, by way of a parting shot, 'I'm too soft...' It sounded a bit double-edged.

So our second big adventure began. The first, a Saharan crossing in an old ex-London taxi three years previously, had left us with nostalgic memories and an increasing urge to traverse more of the world's remoter areas. Unless one has spent periods living a nomadic existence, simply and close to the elements, it is difficult to understand the tremendous lure of distant horizons. Our wanderlust, instead of abating, grew more severe with the passing of months, until we found ourselves irretrievably committed to reaching northern Australia, twelve thousand miles distant, in order to film Arnhem Land aborigines for television and to write about these primitive and fascinating people.

We could, I suppose, have reached the Antipodes quickly and efficiently by plane or ship, but this would have been a tedious mode of travel compared with passing through countries like Persia and Afghanistan. Overland travel won hands down.

Our choice of independent transport was not difficult. It had to be absurdly economical, yet robust enough to carry two people and luggage half across the world. Possessing a modicum of protection from the elements, the NSU Prima scooter was encouragingly sturdy and on inspection seemed to have been assembled with typical German thoroughness. We both felt that it was a shrewd choice and we were confident without being complacent. Our machine had not the power or performance of its cousin the motor-cycle. But then, on this trip we wanted to keep our speed average down to a minimum. The faster one travels the less one sees.
A Painful Beginning (Chapter 1 - France)

A few hours later we were spinning along, smelling agreeably of Gauloises and garlic, with a friendly blue sky roofing the straight avenue of poplars. Ahead lay Reims, the German border and half the world beyond.

The beginning of the first lap, My mind reached ahead to un-known lands east of the Yugoslav mountains and, as I conjectured, a sensation of butterflies fluttered in my stomach. Nita, living for the moment, was humming 'April in Paris'. An old man straight-ened himself and waved to us from the middle of some furrows. A horn-blasting maniac in a decrepit old Citroen nearly put us in the ditch. (I would have to remember to keep to the right.) A Bentley whispered past, with GB plate and full complement of passengers, and I experienced a moment of envy.

After a while a neat concrete sign heralded Reims-Centre Ville.

We stopped only briefly to replenish our usual French diet of pate and those crunchy, delicious loaves which we English seem unable to produce, then on again through the gentle country of eastern France. It was all very pleasant and normal, and as yet almost impossible to realize that we were not just enjoying an annual holiday -a jaunt which would end within the prescribed fortnight. I patted my pocket containing the passport crammed with strangely written visas, in order to convince myself that we were, indeed, mounted on this tiny vehicle, heading for the Northern Territory and the filming of those descendants of Stone Age Man, the aborigines.

'Aborigines! My God, they're awful people. Dirty, more animal than human. They stink fouly and have the morals of alley-cats. I'm sure you'll find them utterly distasteful.' The memory re-turned of our young, ash-blonde Australian visitor, fitting her cigarette into a long holder and puffing vigorously. 'Look, most of you people here in England visualize Australia as a continent of mulga scrub, overrun with blacks and kangaroos, relieved here and there by hard-drinking coarse-voiced swagmen, who fight at the drop of a hat and whose vocabulary doesn't extend beyond "fair dinkum" and" my bloody oath". Why is it that every visitor wants to go poking about among the blacks in the middle of nowhere? There's a whole new world to see if you only thread your way around the coast.'
'Well,' I had said, 'I don't know about the other visitors, but so far as we are concerned you have answered your own question, Miss Australia. I've seen enough of the modern world for a while, and I can think of nothing more refreshing than a prolonged stay among the world's most primitive people, where I can study men hunting for food and not for wealth—or even more unwholesome gain.'

I swerved to avoid an extra large pot-hole. Dear, decadent, adult France. It was exhilarating to be back once more on her soil, the stepping-off place of our previous adventure—the one that had so nearly ended in disaster, and yet had aroused in me an insatiable desire to 'see over the next horizon'.

The idea of our present expedition was formed when the previous one had ended. And now, here we were, putting the plan into action. It has been said that mistakes do not exist—they are the portals of discovery. . . .

The seeds of the Australian venture were first planted in the pressurized cabin of our homing aircraft in 1953, fifteen thousand feet above the Sahara. Anyway, Nita, who was wearing her usual airborne expression at the time—a somewhat 'determined-to-die- dignified' look-turned from her restricted view of the night and vague contours of the desert far below and said, with undue emphasis: 'Heights are for fools and mountain goats. The next time you get itchy feet, please restrict the transport to wheels or water. Wings, so far as I'm concerned, are definitely out.'

...Next time? At that moment the next time was something about which I could only dream. West Africa had fallen farther behind and the aircraft had thrust hungrily across the desert wastes, consuming in minutes what had taken us days, even weeks, of heart-breaking toil to achieve. I had felt a certain resentment at the time towards the sacrilegious way in which man telescoped such majestic and endless wilderness. What did those air travellers around us know of that real magic below? I felt they knew nothing: surrendering themselves briefly to the care of a metal contrivance, to be transported from one continent to another within a night. A brief flirt with the stars, and that was that.

I, too, did not like flying. The other passengers had begun to settle for sleep, fidgeting and easing themselves into more comfortable positions. The hostess made one more nursemaid tour; individual lamps began to snick off. Besides me, Nita huddled under a blanket, rolling herself into a
tight ball to escape from the cold in the oblivion of sleep.

I remembered lighting another cigarette and my gaze had wandered from the dimly lit fuselage to the velvet, starlit night. I was unaccountably melancholy. Our Saharan adventures were over. What would be next? Well, those Nigerians had been a wonderfully interesting race; not the mission-trained mimics of the whites, but Hausa tribesmen with their historic traditions, simple dignity, and superb bushcraft, who had given our hunting party, out from Kana, such a tremendous welcome at the village of Birnin Barko. These tribesmen had turned the whole community inside out under the guidance of the headman to make our stay as happy and entertaining as they humanly could. For myself, it was good and fruitful to spend time among such primitive people. Deep physical and mental satisfaction was to be found living in those elemental surroundings.

So at some time in the future we would go again among the 'savages'. It was with such memories running through my head that I had thought eventually about the Australian aborigines. What makes men go out into the void spaces of the earth? Perhaps from an increasingly complex world men go out to gaze in wonderment upon simplicity.

'It's nearly six o'clock. Don't you think we had better start looking for a camping spot?' I was jerked from my reverie into the present and the immediate problem of those who would camp on the Continent, France in particular—the finding of a suitable spot. And this time we had no intention of adding about forty miles to our intended daily total by cruising along slowly at dusk, scrutinizing the landscape and mumbling, 'No, that's no good—too marshy,' or 'Hell, no, we'd never get across that ditch.' This time we were not in a car with a sump especially designed to bury itself in those deceptive folds in the ground. If we were to see an attractive, beckoning copse, nestling against a sheltered hill-side, then that is where we would camp, even if we had to lift our transport over and through the natural and man-made barriers.

And by six o'clock on that first afternoon, we were both looking in earnest for our first open-air bedroom. For the truth was that we could stand no more. After five minutes of scanning the landscape right and left we turned off the road down a rutted cart track and through a five-barred gate into a field of close-cropped grass. It wasn't much, but it was home, at least for a night.
Oh, the sheer delight of dismounting and stamping around to ease the burning, aching areas of flesh. Surely we would get ac-climatized after a few days. 'We can't possibly reach Australia if we don't,' moaned Nita, striking a pose like an advertisement for a sciatica cure. 'Oh! My back.' She said it for the two of us. I turned my head slowly, with much pain, and looked at the scooter with distaste. I could only see it, at that moment, as a mobile instrument of torture. 'You horrible little thing,' I grated. As I spoke, the prop-stand sank slowly into the soft grass and the machine tilted slowly off balance and fell on its side.

We rushed to pick it up and Nita gave me a reproachful glance. 'It objects to being maligned. After all, it can't choose its owners, and if we had spent a few months adapting ourselves to scooter-ing - as I suggested - we would not be in this state now. Ouch!' That sounded like the gambit of a good row, so I muttered some-thing about 'everything being better in a few days', and suggested that we should make some tea. For my wife these are always then magic words of solace and so, with much anguished whimpering, we unpacked.

Even our sad physical state could do little to detract from my pleasure at our first evening on the road. There was the gay little orange two-man tent, complete with matching fly-sheet and, in-side, the two wonderfully warm swansdown-filled sleeping-bags; tough, ultra-lightweight equipment which the manufacturers had confidently and generously presented to us. 'That equipment,' they had said, 'will stand up to anything.' At that time we had no conception how right they were. Looking at our canvas home and the bedding within, it was incredible to think that only a few minutes previously the whole lot had been contained in one small roll in a neat waterproof bag on top of our other baggage. Next, we unpacked the off-side pannier-bag and assembled our faithful old folding stove and the rest of the culinary equipment. And while I humped the big valise which held our precious cameras, films, paperwork, and spare clothing to the back of the tent to act as our pillow, Nita rummaged through the other pannier for some-thing to appease our sharp appetites. I kindled a fire, just to make things cosy, and strolled off with my rifle to see if there were any myxo-free rabbits or a pigeon in the vicinity. There weren't, but walking ironed out some of the creases and I returned to the camp empty-handed but supremely content.
Down there at the bottom of the slope lay the tent and the scooter, and in the flickering firelight my wife preparing a meal. Beyond this scene were the fields and the purple countryside of France, all of which we had to ourselves. And to the right of me, that thin black ribbon of tarmac periodically revealed by the brief amber headlights of a passing truck or fast-travelling car; the ribbon we would follow-almost without a break-to the very tip of Ceylon. People may be gregarious, comfort- and security-loving, but for me nothing could compare with this life - with all its demands - on the move, away from cities, where one never knew who, or what, was round the next bend in the road. The anticipation excited, as it always does, and filled me with happiness. I burst into a tuneless song as I strode down again to the camp.

'Mind where you're pointing that thing! I hope it isn't loaded.' Nita has always been wary of firearms, ever since the time in the desert when she accidentally blew a hole through the roof of our vehicle and deafened herself for a week.

'No, it's not loaded and I didn't see a thing, but nevertheless I'm on top of the world.'

'Well, please come down again long enough to put some more wood on the fire - I can hardly see.' It was evident that my wife did not share my joyful mood, but she usually adapts herself slowly to a nomadic life and then, if anything, is more enthusiastic than I. She was probably brooding over her lost domesticity. I went off to find some more wood.

By the time we had eaten, the aches and pains of the day had largely subsided and, as the air began to chill, we crawled into the tent and snuggled into our sleeping-bags. It was the best place from which to hold a post-mortem of our first day in the field.

'Well, so far so good. We left home early this morning and here we are in one piece and running smoothly on the right side of Reims. The scooter has behaved perfectly and tomorrow I'll put a little more air in the front tyre, just to improve the steering a bit. But apart from that we don't need to modify anything. The gear is riding securely and nothing seems to be loosening; and our bodies will get used to long periods in the saddle.' Here I had to shift my hip from a particularly sharp lump that protruded through the ground-sheet. 'We're going to find this trip a piece of cake, don't you
think so, darling?' There was no answer.

I withdrew my gaze from the embers of the fire which glowed through the open flap and looked at Nita; sound asleep. My watch read exactly seven p.m.

Within a few minutes my own eyes felt like lead and refused to stay open any longer. As I stretched out beside my wife, a drowsy brain registered a last somnolent thought. 'We're com-pletely drugged with fresh air.' As indeed we were.

Even so, it was impossible for me to lie in blissful, unbroken sleep until daylight, for the first night with the ground for a mat-tress is always an ordeal; and when one is on the threshold of a journey through virtually unknown country, sleep becomes an elusive luxury. The strange unngiving hardness beneath and an active imagination, sharpened by unfamiliar darkness, produces an unsettled state of mind that pictures innumerable pitfalls along the way ahead.

Unknown country. Well, here in central Europe we were all right. Good roads, regular tourist traffic, even Yugoslavia a reason-ably known quantity. But what of beyond? Even the A.A. had been vague about conditions in Bulgaria, for instance. But they had advised us to keep our cine-camera out of sight, and not to fail to report to the British Embassy in Sofia-just in case we should vanish!

And the other enigma-Afghanistan. There were some queer looks when that cropped up. 'Be careful, old chap. They're a bit hot-blooded, you know. My brother was up in the North-West Frontier just before the war. There's no one to help you much until you reach Kabul, and as that is more or less right on the Pakistan frontier, you're very much on your own for practically the whole distance from west to east.'

Well, why go through Bulgaria-or Afghanistan for that matter? There was an alternative route, via Greece to avoid Bulgaria and across the lower, recognized route overland through southern Persia to Quetta, thus by-passing Afghanistan. But that persistent little imp curiosity kept drawing me away from the known towards the unknown. I wanted to acquaint myself with Communism, for instance, on its home ground. And Afghanistan held the fascination of a country which, like Tibet, holds the
mysterious title of Forbidden Land. The formalities in getting visas were certainly forbidding; they included personal applications and sheaves of questionnaires to complete. So it seemed that there were these two stretches to be negotiated warily, as well as Northern Turkey, the deserts of Persia, and the entire length of the Indian continent, all to be tackled on a heavily-laden vehicle with eight--inch-diameter wheels and a 1.5-horsepower engine; and all this before we even reached Australia. Impossible. . . . Here we were, at the end of the first day, aching in every joint and we hadn't yet been off tarmac. How were we going to feel after a day on the rugged dirt tracks which, by all accounts, would start in Yugo-slavia?

The wind, eddying across the moonlit countryside, caught playfully at the fly-sheet, simulating the sound of a prowler. Just first-night nerves. It was no good, I couldn't sleep. A smoke at three a.m., however, is always soothing. . . .

Yet, for all the fearful speculations, I would not have changed places with anyone. This was the essence of living, and in years to come I would remember July the 4th, 1956. All that this date would mean to my safely-housed ex-colleagues, whom I momentarily envied, was perhaps American Independence Day.

The ensuing days and nights along the roads of France were an admirable test for the inevitable rough stuff to follow. We discovered that our fuel range was two hundred and eighty miles, including the two-gallon reserve can which stood between my feet; this meant that over rough country we could rely on something like two hundred miles between refills.

We also adopted a modified driving technique. I began to realize after the second day that I was not in fact driving, but riding, and the introduction of regular half-hourly breaks helped us to cover the mileage far more agreeably. Nita would tap me firmly, when I would immediately pull over and stop, steady the machine and wait for the groan as she leaned heavily on my shoulder and gingerly dismounted. As many motorists will know, stopping on command requires an almost superhuman effort, and wives never realize the reluctance with which their menfolk re-linquish the controls. However, with this new system the groans were briefer and certainly less vehement. As the miles mounted, our stiffness lessened and the commanding taps grew less urgent. This was as well, for later we had
frequently to cover a hundred miles without stopping. To do this on a motor-scooter calls for practice, stoicism, and muscle development here there normally isn't much muscle.
Deutschland uber Alles (Chapter 2 - to Stuttgart, Germany)
John Butterworth, head of the NSU distributors in Great Britain, had been anxious that on our way through Germany we should call at the town of Neckarsulm. First to make quite certain that our scooter was in as good condition as possible, and then to let us discover what had been reconstructed from the pile of rubble which not long ago was the NSU factory.

But it was not only Neckarsulm where the Teutonic beavers had been labouring. Once through hybrid Strasbourg, with its semi-French, semi-German architecture and its hybrid language (Bon, d' accord, danke), then the impact of a highly industrious nation was evident to the most casual observer. The agricultural areas near the border were a glowing panorama of efficient farming. A good second-class road which took us part of the way to Stuttgart passed through a countryside bulging with crops. We were surprised to see bullock carts which had apparently not been replaced by mechanization, but their continued use did not seem to have impaired food production.

Everything was neat, clean, and tidy: the villages of cobbled streets; lively Gothic-printed signs; ubiquitous beer gardens and high-eaved brick and timber houses, jutting top storeys, and flock filled mattresses airing from bedroom windows. Coming from France it was strange to find the streets empty in the evenings, and we spent our first day-including a night's camping-without speaking to anyone.

This did not matter. We were in no hurry and for the first day or two Nita and I were undecided whether to like these people or not. It was odd, and it was now ten years since the end of the war, but we were still wary. Although it was a long time since the last bugle call had echoed, it was at first impossible to forget that this was our former enemy. My own childhood was suffused with stories of my father and grandfather fighting these people. And my youth was a still-vivid memory of London in flames at night, our own house severely damaged, and our country fighting desperately for its existence. These thoughts made it difficult to smile and make pleasant conversation and, indeed, for a few days I didn't even try. But gradually the Nazis and the S.S. seemed to become meaningless symbols of a nightmare past which no longer existed in the realm of reality; which is, perhaps, as it should be. After a week in the Fatherland, we began to admire the ex-master-race a great deal.
Unlike the Prima which had originated there, its riders were seeing Germany-as the reader will have gathered-for the first time. And what seemed the most outstanding characteristic of this race who are constantly being described, with grudging admiration, as industrious? It was purpose. An almost tangible atmosphere of purpose filled every village and town. Could we in England visualize our children being in school by seven-thirty in the morning? And construction teams working on building projects throughout the night by floodlighting? Their gods are Efficiency and Thoroughness, and they live these ideals twenty-four hours a day, a day that starts at seven a.m. for everyone and finishes, on a social note, any time between midnight and three a.m. One cannot conceive how it is done, but (to console ourselves) there is a tremendous spur for such a nationalistic race. Unification is uppermost in everyone's thoughts, and they lay each brick and turn every Volkswagen off the production lines with such care and purpose that one is convinced beyond all doubt that, sooner or later, Berlin will once again govern this riven nation as one Germany. It is impossible not to admire such drive and purpose.

The Autobahn, built originally as a Kriegbahn, is of course a perfect means of getting from A to B. But for us, scooter-bound for Stuttgart, it was an everlasting slab of white, wide concrete passing painfully slowly beneath our wheels. A cruising speed of anything less than sixty miles an hour guaranteed all that was worst in motoring boredom and there was little incentive to drag our eyes away from the mesmerizing stone squares. It was like driving along an endless aircraft runway, and about as interesting. The only spots of relief were the neatly cut out lay-bys, sensibly tree-studded crescents and fixed picnic tables and benches.

'Stuttgart 30k.' 'STUTTGART.' Yes, but the designers of the Autobahn were obviously loath to release motorists from their symmetrical clutches. There we were at Stuttgart, but we couldn't get into Stuttgart. An arrowed sign told us clearly enough, 'Autobahn Exit', but a hundred yards farther on the mystery began. We were confronted with the most complex maze of concrete signs, fly-overs, circular sweeps that spiralled into themselves, dead ends that finished in the scrub, and short, sharp gradients that led to bridges from which we could look over and see where we had just come from. Round and round, up and over, through and turn left, with never a sign of the city, until an abrupt stop against a 'T' junction told us that our destination was Stuttgart. We joined a Legion of the Lost, who stood with
maps and bewildered expressions in the quiet little out-of-play pocket. There were a carload of Italians, a German motor-cyclist, and ourselves, all keen to get into the city if such a possibility existed.

We joined forces and tackled the problem of exit as a team. Three times we played 'tag' amid the concrete, and three times we finished up with likely-looking streams of traffic which all turned out to be heading for Munich. After that we decided to try solo tactics and, rather miraculously, retraced our way back to the spot whence we had come and started operations all over again.

This time we were more adroit. We waited for a big furniture van, showing that elusive name on the side, and fell in behind. This move, after many devious and irrational excursions, paid off, and we dropped our unerring and unsuspecting pilot in the city centre.

Stuttgart is a city like any others, but cleaner perhaps than many, with extensive rebuilding programmes in progress, wide streets, well-stocked stores, and a number of steep hills. Nita chose an attractively neon-lit food shop for revictualling and of course it stood half-way up one of these acute slopes. With much struggling I managed to park the scooter (there was nearly a hundredweight of equipment over the rear wheel) and, breathing heavily, followed her into the shop.

We filled a knapsack with pumpernickel bread, corned beef, and tomatoes and learned that the obliging little Fraulein who served us had a brother in England. Outside there were a knot of interested characters listening to an animated and self-appointed lecturer who was explaining, with gestures, all about this German machine, with Union Jacks on the side and Australia written on the top of the headlamp. As always, with an audience present, a smooth get-away was well nigh impossible. We talked in atrocious German to the spokesman who was interested, like most of the people we met, to know our route to the far-off destination. The others, including a couple of women, gazed slowly from him to us and back again.

So with studied nonchalance I mounted, pulled the front wheel away from the deep gutter and before I could find the point of balance, Nita began to climb aboard. The extra weight was almost more than I could hold, with the equilibrium already upset and the nose pointing downhill at an acute angle. The front wheel refused to stay straight and we described an erratic,
drunken half circle, with my left foot slapping spasmodically and desperately against the cobbled hillside. Wobbling awkwardly away from a speeding Mercedes, we finally gained impetus and got away in a general downhill direction (when we really wanted to go up) and with a herculean effort-of which Nita was totally unaware-I managed to keep the machine upright. Dignity was only just maintained. The onlookers gazed perplexedly (probably that word 'Australia') and Nita said, observantly, 'Aren't we going the wrong way?' All of which clinched my resolve never to stop again halfway down (or up) a hill. As Stuttgart fell behind us my wife remarked, 'Really, Mike, you are disgustingly short-tempered at times.'

We camped early that night beneath some of those majestic pine trees that are typical of Germany. Our bed of sweet-smelling, resilient pine needles made sleeping a pleasure. But beneath a starry night sky, it was hard to relinquish our comfortable positions by the glowing fire and, as always when the camp was a successful one, we retired late.
Deutschland uber Alles (Chapter 2 - NSU Factory, Germany)

Where the rivers Neckar and Ulm meet stands, aptly, the town of Neckarsulm. And on the cold, rainy morning of our arrival we had no difficulty in locating the NSU factory. For Neckarsulm is NSU, as one of the directors pointed out.

Little blue-and-white signs led us through a pleasant township, across an ungated railway line, and up to a very imposing, remote-controlled entrance. We waited until the large double gates withdrew smoothly and then drove across the threshold, past a reception block, over a wide flower-bordered forecourt and on to the ultra-modern, beautifully designed main building. The little Prima had, temporarily, come home.

From that moment until our departure three days later we were encompassed by the most efficient organization in the world. Smoothly, from the word 'go', the wheels clicked into gear. No frustrating, interminable periods of waiting here, and not once did we hear the word 'can't'.

We were introduced to the representative for Asia, Herr Krieg, who gave us comprehensive information about the spare parts and repair situation in Pakistan and India. Hot coffee and sandwiches (always welcome to two-wheeled travellers) appeared (and disappeared) while I filled in a large sheet of everything I felt needed attention on the Prima. There wasn't much but it was extremely satisfying to write such items as: strengthen pannier frames, reserve fuel-warning light not working, heavy-duty rear tyre required, etc., and to know that when we again saw our scooter (which was then being wheeled carefully away by a white-coated foreman) these faults would be rectified.

Herr Stoll, Export Manager, who spoke excellent English with a slight American accent, had us and our equipment smoothly transferred from the factory to the nearby Hotel Post, in which we were luxuriously housed and fed. Not a hitch, and nothing was too much trouble. We decided to send some surplus baggage home. 'Just make a pile of everything you don't need and leave it in the office,' said Herr Stoll. We left it. A week later it arrived home, registered and perfectly packed. There was absolutely nothing one could criticize during the three-day respite—which so far as I was concerned was unique.
The whole place had an air of quality. Not one shop in the township displayed shoddy goods. Not one scruffy workman; all were neatly dressed with their personal bits and pieces stowed away in good leather brief-cases. Not a sign of litter fouled any of the gutters. In the post office we were served without having to wait, during any time of the business day. And always that brisk air of purpose about the people. Our stay in Neckarsulm was stimulating.

We wandered through the older part of the town, where new buildings were being erected, and where Nita remarked in wonderment: 'That's the first time I've seen all the workmen on a building site working at once.' Then into a Schuhaus, where a fine old craftsman handstitched my footwear while I waited. 'Very good boots,' he appraised, looking over the Simpson riding boots with an expert eye. Somehow I felt glad those boots were English made.

We visited the NSU museum which was in the town itself and where were housed some of the earliest of motorized cycles, a few dating back to the turn of the century. But it was the factory which impressed me most vividly. Having not long before spent a week at one of the largest car factories in England, I was able to make comparisons and see just how the Germans gained their superiority.

It was not through technical achievement that they were overtaking us as primary exporters, but by human effort. They work harder than we do, and are more zealous. There had been a detailed time and motion study at Neckarsulm. No one walked a single step without purpose. During two days on a conducted tour and wandering round at will, we never saw a production line held up for lack of parts, a not uncommon occurrence in our own country. Not that one could reasonably compare Neckarsulm with the British car factory I had visited, but I couldn't help feeling that the Volkswagen factory would be little different in operation from NSU's. The foundry was amazingly clean, when normally a foundry is fume-laden and filthy. And the assembly mechanics, immaculate in white overalls, had hands as clean as the clerks' in the offices above them. There was cotton waste in abundance. We never heard the equivalent of 'Where's that blasted rag!' They worked like surgeons with superbly forged spanners, spotless and shining in their quick-release holders, dexterous to a degree, using their screwdrivers like scalpels. No swearing, grunting, or furrowed brows:
the job went like clockwork from start to finish.

We watched twelve engine units being tested, and twelve times they roared into life and ran faultlessly. It was all highly impressive.

I happened to mention to Herr Stoll that the Prima air-filter did not seem to be fully efficient in the matter of air intake. Six months later in Melbourne I was to see one of the new models, with modified air filter snugly fitted. Only a small point raised by one person, but an indication that any complacency over a product spells loss to those who would compete in the everlasting race for the capture of world markets.
Deutschland uber Alles (Chapter 2 - Past Munich, Germany)

We were sorry to forsake the luxury of the Hotel Post as guests of NSU and to relinquish the rich living and return to our spartan road once again, a very bad second-class road which took us south to Munich. The highways in Germany-apart from the Autobahnen-suffer badly during the winters, which are severe, and each spring and summer are spent on frantic road mending to prepare these routes for another winter onslaught. Hence we found the going very rough in patches, and somewhere along the way we lost our camera tripod and two water bottles, which must have bounced unseen from the pile of luggage behind us. This stretch was a good test and it was obvious-despite our whittling down-that we should have to arrange our packing more securely before long.

In Munich we called at the transport agency to pick up our first batch of cine-film from Rediflusion in London. I still had a few hundred feet left in the valise, which was fortunate because there was no stock for us to collect. Something (inevitably) had gone wrong with the system, and we had arrived too early for the dispatch department of ITV. There was nothing we could do and our exasperation was futile.

It was Saturday morning, and our tight budget would not stand a week-end in Munich. Belgrade was the next pick-up point for film, so we would just have to be economical with our existing stock. Five hundred feet of material went back to London; mostly departure sequences taken at Dover, and establishing shots of France being assailed by two Britons on a German scooter bound for Australia-which given the right scriptwriter could have been made amusing. Anyway, we should have to be very selective in photographic subjects until we reached the Yugoslav capital.

So on a sunny Saturday morning, after gazing at the ornate Hofbrauhaus (where the Big Plot was alleged to have been hatched) and the site of the infamous Beer Hall (where it all started), we let our imagination run riot for a while and saw the throngs of leisurely shoppers, strolling around their virtually rebuilt city, as jack-booted conquerors marching to war. For some reason, however, the centre of Munich reminded me a little of Bath, so we turned our Fatherland product (1956 vintage) in an easterly direction to continue with our Wanderjahr.

We were now, of course, in the American zone of Germany, so I suppose we could not consider it surprising when a couple of mornings later we
overtook an empty helicopter parked in the middle of the road: a military hover-plane with large white letters proclaiming that this apparently discarded property had belonged at one time to the USAAF. We had the road to ourselves, and as we moved carefully past this strange metal beast I felt that there must be an explanation for it. I had heard that our transatlantic allies were prosperous, but surely not so much so that they could afford to simply leave the odd helicopter strewn along the highway, not in peace-time, anyway. And it appeared they could not, for, as we stopped to admire this unique road-block, two burly, khaki-clad figures clambered from a nearby ditch, wearing Hollywood expressions-complete with gum-of cynical toughness, accompanying stubble haircuts, calf-length assault boots, and neat little white labels sewn over breast pockets: labels that announced for all to see that here before us were Lieut. S. Antonio and Sgt. Kirschner of the U.S. Army Air Force.

Sergeant Kirschner turned his back modestly to finish his adjustments when he saw Nita. He need not have worried, however, for we were both absorbed in trying to read every one of the literary appendages on the lieutenant's uniform. We dragged our eyes away reluctantly from the captions and looked him straight in the face.

They both nodded grimly at us, replaced their steel helmets, hitched their revolvers, picked up two rifles from the ground and set off to push the helicopter on to the gravel verge. They were evidently on a very important mission. We waited unashamedly to see how it would all end, half-expecting them to make a spinechilling take-off, with ethereal strains of 'Into the Wide Blue Yonder' welling stereophonically from the surrounding hills. We waited, almost at attention, with bated breath.

But we waited in vain. Instead of the soul-stirring musical crescendo there was a dirty little noise from the hooter of an impatient Volkswagen at our rear. We moved hastily from our viewpoint on the crown of the road. Our two heroes, far from leaping athletically into their sky chariot, sat down heavily on a nearby hump of ground and lit cigarettes in stony silence.

Me. 'What's the trouble? Has it broken down?'

Lieut. S. Antonio. 'Outa gas.'

Sgt. Kirschner (glancing at enormous chronometric wristwatch). 'Boy'll
bealawng frawm the Deepoh bah thirdee-afIder wi' mower gass.'

Me.'Oh.'

Lieut. A. to Nita. 'Yeah, we gotta be back in Munich by sundown. Say, you two hikin' that heap to Australia?'

Me. 'Yeah. Er, yes.'

Lieut. A. 'Howja go for visas through all these countries?'

Nita. 'Just collect them from the various embassies in London.' Sgt. K. (idly surveying Union Jacks on scooter). 'You English?' Me. 'Yes. You American?' (Exchange of meaning glances, pregnant pause.)

Them. 'Ha, ha.'

Us. 'Ha, ha, ha.'

Me. 'How do you like Germany?'

Lieut. A. 'Not much. I just come from Japan. The people here are sullen and unfriendly. In Japan everything was great, just great.' We all stared at the fuelless helicopter, conjuring up a Japan that was Great. An elderly, bespectacled man with a little boy holding his hand had sprung from somewhere and were peering into the cockpit.

'Kirsch,' said the Lieutenant. 'Better fetch those carbines over here. You know how these Krauts'll go nuts over weapons.'

'Sure,' said the Sergeant, walking over and retrieving the lethal weapons from the reaches of a tempted grandfather. The Lieutenant suddenly became quite garrulous. 'You English are really gone on crazy stunts, ain't you? We had that guy in the States for a while who thrashed across the Atlantic in a waterproof jeep. Benny Carlin or sump'n his name was; and a girl who came across in a rowin' boat.'

Nita said, 'Ben Carlin is an Australian. But then, the love of a challenge is really Commonwealth-wide. Ann Davison is English, though.'
'Yeah, that was the one, Ann Davison.'

'Did you ever read their books?'

'Naw; too busy policin' Nips.' (Our vision of a Japan that was Great wilted a little.)

'Here'za gasswaggon now, Lootenant.'

A large khaki tanker drew up with a flourish and three G.I.s in fatigue uniforms, sans name-tags, jumped down and with perfunctory salutes started to drag the fuel line up to the helicopter.

'Jeez, Lootenant,' said one of the newcomers, 'the Cap'n's wild as a hornet. He's sure gonna chew yore-' Nita coughed diplomatically right on cue, 'an ef'n you ain't back at base in one hour dead, he's markin' you and the Sergeant there down Awol.'

Our Lieutenant received this verbal message from his superior with an inscrutable expression. 'O.K., you guys. Let's have the gas an' you can keep the bull to yourselves.'

The operation was quickly completed. The tanker, with feedpipe recoiled and stowed, backed around and shot off at high speed back towards Munich, and the two aviators climbed into the cockpit and started up.

As the rotor began to whirr round at increasing speed, a steelhelmeted head appeared at the open side window.

'Don't try breaking any speed records on that thing, will you?'

'No fear,' I shouted above the roar. 'We can't afford to run out of petrol!'

They both grinned and rose vertically above our heads. A hand waved and soon the 'copter was just a speck in the distance.

'I've got a feeling,' said my wife, 'that in the not too distant future we'll be wishing we could do that.'
Deutschland uber Alles (Chapter 2 - Eagles Nest, Germany)

It was a warm, summer day—the first we had really experienced since starting—and we were in fine fettle. A friendly, cloudless sky above and ahead, just ahead, snuggled between enormous limestone mountains, the village of Berchtesgaden.

The previous night we had spent five hours weathering a ferocious thunderstorm that had all but brought our tent down about our ears. So on that sunny morning we were grateful for the drying warmth that seeped into our steaming baggage and excited at the prospect of seeing the historic Kelsteinhaus, or Eagle's Nest, Hitler's eyrie, which even then seemed to dominate the entire country around us.

There it was, just a small stone house, nothing startling in itself, but perched upon the highest mountain in sight. We felt it was watching every little movement of the toy world below.

So how to reach the Kelsteinhaus? Certainly from the centre of Berchtesgaden—full of Tyrolean atmosphere and Nordic types resplendent in Lederhosen—it looked impossible to reach by road. It seemed to be at an altitude far above the tree line, a man-made dot on the majestic peak of white limestone. It looked unassailable by anything less than an expert team of mountaineers; this was obviously one of the original attractions of the site. But (as the jovial fellow in leather shorts, ornamental braces, and footless socks, told us) there was a way up the road, but it was a long climb and we couldn't hope to go all the way by 'autoroller'. However, there was 'some arrangement' farther up to make the final, virtually perpendicular approach. We took his word for it, fortified ourselves with a couple of enormous frothing beers, and started for the summit and the house on the roof-top of Europe.

Up and up, higher and higher, we wound our way through forested mountains, along a narrow road where water seeped from sheer rock walls on our left. While down towards the right, the village of Berchtesgaden—when we glimpsed it occasionally through the trees—became an increasingly diminishing picture as the minutes passed. Higher still, and the Prima purred with relief as I dropped down to second gear. Fifteen miles an hour and climbing steadily.

It must have been something like half-way to the top when we stopped to
eat. The Kelsteinhaus would have to wait. It was much further than we had anticipated. The mountain air and those icy potent beers (wonderful appetizers) had made us desperately hungry. We stopped on the brink of a sheer drop into infinity and feverishly dug into our knapsack for Camembert cheese and one of the lead-heavy, nutrition-packed loaves of treacle brown, butter and tomatoes and the thermos of coffee.

We sat in blissful silence, gazing out over a vast horizon, wolfing every morsel with delight. I shall always remember that simple meal under the shadow of the Eagle's Nest with more clarity, perhaps, than the nest itself, for it was satisfying to a degree; which the Kelsteinhaus was not.

But first to reach it. More spiralling to the sky, with our little engine screaming valiantly in first gear and the trees around us rapidly thinning. How much farther? A long way. Up and up again, with the engine, incredibly, still keeping us in motion. Another walled sweep to the left then, suddenly, level ground again and we had arrived. Crowds of people, car-park attendants in local costume, side-stalls, and a row of Mercedes coaches parked in the middle. Had we arrived? No. Before us were some of the 'arrangements' for making the final step. Through a crowd of print frocks and racing children, we saw a large pair of canopied gates, the entrance to the private, one-way road that led up to the house. A road which could only be assailed via one of the coaches: price-eleven marks (or thereabouts) each person.

Evading the candy-floss vendors, postcard kiosks, and soft-drink stalls, we parked the scooter among the mass of other vehicles and, rather bewildered by everything, took our two seats in the rapidly filling Mercedes.

Presently the coach moved off smoothly beneath the massive gates, which at an earlier time must have been crested with a spread eagle and surrounded by officers of the elite Personal Guard. But on that day it was attended by a white-coated guide who waved our coach impatiently through. After a short time I began to see why the coaches were Mercedes and why they were all virtually brand new.

We ploughed on, one hairpin-bend after another, and all the time in first gear. I could only liken it to that first, almost vertical bend, of Porlock Hill in Somerset—save that this gradient went on and on and on. The ascent was frightening. Having at various times driven across the Pyrenees, the Atlas
mountains, and part of the Himalaya range, I can claim some experience of
alpine motoring, but never have I sat so tautly on the edge of my seat as I
did on that horrific ride up to the Eagle's Nest.

It was not the climb itself-though that was nerve-tingling enough-but the
wretched driver would insist on keeping up an endless patter and looking
over his shoulder more than at the road ahead; or rather the road at the side,
above, or below us. After the first ten minutes, with our ears crackling
ceaselessly, and all the flippant chatter long since silenced, even Nita
voiced her alarm, which was unusual for her. 'Mike, I shall have to get out
and walk if this goes on much longer.'

'Nonsense,' I replied, in a voice that sounded strangely unlike my own.
'They do this every day of the week.' Nevertheless, we held hands all the
way up and I'm not sure who was the more comforted.

I tried to see the majesty of the view from the window, but all that
impressed itself on me was the height of the viewpoint, an elevation which
was rapidly becoming positively stratospheric. The faces around us (save
for the ruddy-visaged driver) were blanched and uneasy. Someone was
sick. I saw Berchtesgaden below and the nearby lake that shimmered like a
silver three-penny-piece-and about as big--so many thousands of feet
below. A voice in English was saying that this road had taken four years to
complete, from the entrance gates to the house. I hoped, fervently, that the
project had been attacked with typical German thoroughness, and I
comforted myself (and my wife) with this thought.

The driver, without pausing in his commentary, swung hard on the wheel
and the front of the coach (which one felt was too long, under such
confined conditions, to be manoeuvred safely) lurched out literally into
space, hung there for what seemed an age, then swung back again on an
incredible lock round a ghastly hairpin-bend and for the umpteenth time
swept immediately into the next one. Someone else was sick-or it may
have been the same person-as I watched in horrified fascination our
progress round each dizzy spiral upwards, and Nita clung more fiercely to
my hand. Always reluctant to tackle heights, this was almost more than she
could take, and she was very brave in conquering such fear. It was parallel
to my being asked to make a journey on a crowded tube train in total
darkness, which is something my claustrophobic mind would find difficult
to endure.
The coach burst through a layer of cloud, levelled out, and the straining engine died away to a burble and stopped.

Shakily, but with rapidly gaining confidence, we all alighted and the chatter was soon at a higher and faster pitch than ever. We were standing on the semicircular parapet, fenced with a low, stone wall. The parapet struck a chord in our memories. Yes, the old newsreel pictures of Hitler and Mussolini clinching some pact or other, sitting back, smiling and chatting amicably. Right here, just where Nita and I were standing at that moment. Could it really be fifteen years or more since those dim, half-remembered scenes had been news?

Now we understood why this place was called the Eagle's Nest. Standing on one of the highest peaks in Europe, we could look out towards a breathtaking expanse of Germany on the one side and Austria on the other. Flecks of cloud scudded past below and the air was chilled and thin. It was not difficult to forget the tourists around us and visualize the Man, perhaps elated, perhaps morose, leaning hands on wall to gaze out across his two countries, with the wild mountain winds howling across the limestone summits. No one in the whole of Germany greater or mightier than he! At such times, amidst those surroundings he must have felt that all his dreams would surely be fulfilled.

But the parapet was, so to speak, merely the front garden. To reach the house itself there was one more climb to be made. A journey by lift up through four hundred feet of solid rock. The lift was a superb piece of workmanship, beautifully panelled and completely silent in operation. Entry on this last phase was by way of an electrically lit tunnel, which started from the parapet and reached deep into the centre of the mountain-top. Nita had experienced enough altitude for one day and would elevate herself not another foot; she 'waited on the balcony while I went up with the camera. And there, on emerging from the lift in the entrance hall, was where the climax of my disappointment (first experienced at the commercialized bus terminus) was reached.

The place was spacious, but not pretentious, with walls, doors, and fittings finished in elegant natural woods and with undoubtedly the most inspiring view in Europe from any window, yet this tiny nucleus of modern history-infamous or otherwise- had been utterly spoilt. Today it is nothing more
than a cafe, its original interior entirely altered. Not one picture on the wall, not one piece of personal furniture, no desk, no ornaments; nothing remains. True, the walls are adorned, but by written slogans -in English- advising all and sundry to 'Get your postcards here', and 'Ladies this way'; one even advertising that 'Parties are catered for'.

I walked through what must once have been the main room of this surprisingly modest dwelling, threading my way between tables crowded with diners and out between wall-wide french windows on to the sunlit terrace. More customers. The place was overrun with them. One could gain no conception of the original eyrie. Which was a pity. After a whole morning of exhausting climbing (not to mention the high entrance charge) the Kelstein-haus had revealed itself as an empty shell. There was but one tiny pointer and even that was oblique: the significant date plaque, 1938, over the entrance tunnel.

Greatly disappointed, I took the lift down again to the balcony, where Nita, standing well away from the edge, was gazing across a swiftly clouding sky to the immense distant slopes. I spent twenty minutes convincing her that there was no point in walking down—which would take at least three hours—and, firmly guiding my reluctant wife, climbed once again aboard the coach.

By the time we started it was raining steadily, and I began to reflect on the folly of authorities who could be so short-sighted as to turn what could have been an extremely interesting little museum into a tourists' cafe. However, people could, as we did, still stand on the mountain-top and contemplate if they wished to do so, and they could still nostalgically relive the past, as no doubt many Germans did. I had talked to the man at the entrance turnstile, and during a brief lapse in the constant clicking of the gate he had told me that the Eagle's Nest, by order, was to exhibit no reminder whatsoever of the past. Alles Kaputt.

Our ride down the mountainside was uneventful compared with the upward journey. Thick clouds obscured the heights and everyone felt, ostrich-like, safer with the drizzle turning the windows opaque. Down at the bus terminus, we collected the Prima and spent the next half-hour enjoying a long free-wheel run down to Berchtesgaden.

The whole episode had been interesting but disillusioning—as though we
had just left behind a Tower of London stripped bare and operating as a
canteen. And with that-our final glimpse of Germany-we ran on through a
steady wet mist, to have our carnet stamped for the third time, and the
gateway to Austria courteously opened for our pleasure.
Pink Sky at Night (Chapter 3 - Salzburg, Austria)

Nita liked Austria a great deal and Salzburg in particular. The City of Music was gay and the shops full of things to delight a woman's heart. And the policemen, she thought, were as polite and courteous as our own. To me there seemed to be a rather dated gaiety about this historic city, an air of 'let the rest of the world go by, we only cater for the aesthetic and the genteel'. I liked it, too, in an indulgent sort of way, but after rumbustious Germany I felt it was the Herrenvolk watered down-bed tea versus a good roast joint. Also it rained a lot. For three days the streets glistened and the water ran in torrents along the gutters. Camping was out of the question, so we stayed, at about ten shillings a night, at a little en pension hotel which we were assured would command treble that amount during the Festival.

For people who like quaint architecture there are some interesting little corners to be found in Salzburg; and, if one can negotiate the welter of one-way streets, some lovely squares in which to idle and watch a large slice of Austrian life passing by. Nita chided me for being indifferent and unappreciative, but I was scooterless and anyway I am not too fond of walking, unless it be with a gun. Our Prima was lodged inside the hotel lobby, and as it was the devil's own job to get in and out, the machine languished for three days and nights of pouring rain, jammed between the umbrella stand and a potted plant.

On the fourth morning, with a pale sun contesting heavy clouds, we decided to move off, paid the hotel bill, managed to extricate the scooter from the lobby-nearly decapitating the precious potted plant in the process-and made our way to the shopping centre for a few food stores.

Browsing hungrily around a 'help-yourself' delicatessen, we heard a voice behind us saying in English: 'No, dear, take this one, it's two schillings cheaper.'

We turned to see a smartly dressed middle-aged woman gently admonishing her spendthrift companion, a sprightly old lady with sparkling eyes and a large cherry-dotted hat. They smiled, we introduced ourselves, and it wasn't long before we were all drinking large beers (at the old lady's suggestion) in one of the nearby cafes, and listening to the story of two intrepid adventuresses.
They were Australians, mother and daughter. In between globe-trots they ran a hat shop in Melbourne, but it appeared to be only a front for a far more exciting existence. The daughter, with a sharp, unconscious sense of humour, told us how they came to be wandering around Salzburg.

'We left the salon - not "shop", dear, salon, it's so much more exclusive-for a six months' visit to Paris. We wanted to absorb some of the very latest ideas for our, er, salon, you understand. Of course, all this impressed our clients enormously-\textit{I mean being able to toddle off to the fashion hub of the world, simply shutting the doors in their faces. But it will pay dividends when we get back home. Since the last trip we've been in a very strong position, actually refusing the odd customer here and there. "Can't suit your face at all, madam. So sorry." That sort of thing. Surprising how soon the news gets around to good effect. I know my women, dear.}'

Her mother grinned and nodded delightedly like a wicked old conspirator.

'Then, of course, mother, who makes all our creations, had a French grandfather and we cling frantically to that.' She pushed back a recalcitrant curl beneath a cheeky little red-and-white beret affair, sniffed comfortably and downed the contents of her glass in one good Australian swig.

'Well, we left home fifteen months ago and we haven't set foot in France yet.'

'Where have you been in the meantime?' I asked, signalling the waitress to bring more beers.

'Turkey, dear; and Greece. This is our second trip in five years and the wander-bug has really bitten us badly. We adored Turkey, didn't we, mother?'

'Rather,' said the old lady, 'and Greece too. I'm only sorry I waited until my seventieth birthday before we started travelling.'

The daughter told us that both she and her mother were widows and that they had tired, temporarily, of fitting hats on socialite Melbourne heads, and on the first trip had gone to France to seek new inspiration for headgear. 'But not this time.' Setting off with one suitcase apiece (and one
hat-box) they had delved into some of the less tourist-ridden corners of Europe. The old lady, who was then seventy-five, told how they had bumped and bounced their way in dusty, decrepit old buses along the shores of the Black Sea, wandered around Turkish graveyards admiring (naturally) the behatted tombstones, and keeping their expenses down to a minimum by using their little meth stove in hotel bed-rooms.

'You have to be careful-they don't like to smell meth. fumes wafting under the door when they have an empty restaurant downstairs, you know: we always cook with the windows wide open.' 'So do we,' said Nita. 'Ah, yes; well, one has to be resource-ful. And my daughter carries the food in her hat-box and I'm in charge of the knives, forks, plates and things. It works very well really.'

Her daughter took her up on the theme of managing.

'Last time we were away a year and we spent nearly two thou-sand pounds- Australian of course-but this time, travelling with just the one case each and watching our food bill, we've spent only six hundred pounds in fifteen months. With luck we'll com-plete the round trip on about a thousand pounds between us, which is, I think, most reasonable.'

I agreed with her that it was a masterpiece of financial manage-ment. I hadn't the courage to mention that we had left England with exactly two hundred pounds in travellers' cheques-sterling of course-but then we did not use hotels, except on isolated occasions, and our transport was infinitely cheaper than theirs. Still, sitting there in the middle of Salzburg, I had serious doubts about that two hundred pounds (which was then one hundred and eighty) taking us all the way to Australia. All four of us, how-ever, were unanimous in agreeing that it was a lot more fun trying to squeeze a pint from a half-pint pot, and far more stimulating than sitting back in comfort to pay instead of plan.

I asked them if they had ever been to the north of their own country. The daughter dismissed that. 'Oh, no. There's nothing north of the Blue Mountains to interest us. It's harsh, hot and barren; nothing but scrub and aborigines. We prefer to do our roaming in Europe. Besides, have you ever been to John Q'Groats?' I had, but I knew what she meant. Nita told them that our objective was in fact the Northern Territory, and the aborigines in particular.
'Not on that little machine outside?' , Yes.'

'Good Lord, how exciting.'

They looked with renewed respect at Nita who, I think, was then silently forgiven for being bare-headed.

'But is that all the luggage you're carrying?'

Assured that it was, we all had to troop outside, where we pointed to the word' Australia' to convince them that we weren't joking: that we weren't just on a Continental tour.

'Well,' said our new friends, 'this calls for a little celebration.' So back we went for another sample of the Austrian version of the Australian national drink.

'You must call on us when you reach Melbourne, you know. It will be a marvellous achievement.' Nita suggested they had better save their congratulations until it was a fait accompli. 'Ah, yes,' they replied. 'But you deserve a big pat on the back for making the attempt.'

We basked in modest silence until the waitress had refilled the glasses. Then talked some more, drank some more, and the outcome was that at four o'clock that afternoon, three of the party were hoarse with talking, a little light-headed from the beer, and with smarting eyes from peering through tobacco smoke. The fourth member—the eldest—was as sprightly as ever, clear-eyed, completely unaffected by the potent lager beer and with cherry-speckled hat unmoved from its original position, reluctant to call it a day. Our stamina was sadly unequal to hers. We waved shaky goodbyes and rode back to the hotel, to book in once more with a resigned clerk for another night in Salzburg.
Despite the ruggedness of the Austrian Tyrol, there are a number of superbly engineered passes - twisted as corkscrews, but easily graded and well surfaced. One of them, of course, is the famous Gross Glockner: the one we should have taken but didn't. Nita, as navigator, swore she had read the map correctly. I had my doubts, but whatever the error we took a wrong fork somewhere, and instead of ascending a beautifully made alpine road we found ourselves toiling up a dirt track with gradients that could only be described-like those on the last lap to the Kelsteinhaus-as terrifying.

In first gear we plugged along at a rapidly diminishing pace, climbing (at a rough guess) a gradient of nearly a foot per foot. The revs. sank lower and lower, and our hearts with them. She wasn't going to make it. Not surprising I suppose, but despite the small power output of the 150 c.c. we had felt, until then, that the scooter was almost invincible. It was hard to accept that it just would not climb the mountain. But this was no ordinary mountain. Indeed, it resembled a brick wall. The little machine finally succumbed to the punishment and three times in a hundred yards it stalled, rolled over backwards, and spilt us, our luggage, and itself all over the road.

I had to admit, reluctantly, that the engine would not master the climb unaided. We started to push as well as we could, gaining a little assistance by leaving the engine running, first gear engaged and slipping the clutch. After the first mile of agony our leg muscles ached abominably; and it started to rain. The only sign of life during the dismal interlude was an ancient saloon car which overtook us, steaming heartily and whining up the mountainside in the lowest gear the driver could select: namely reverse. With a two-thousand-foot drop on the offside the motorist, with head craned over shoulder, could do no more than hoot us frantically out of the way. The shower developed into a ferocious thunderstorm which promptly turned the track into a quagmire. We finally reached the summit soaked to the skin, caked with mud, and with unprintable adjectives emerging through my chattering teeth. Wearily, and in a morose silence, we limped past a large sign at the top with a black skull-and-crossbones rampant. In a country of precipitous passes, that was an indication indeed of what we had just accomplished. I was now sick of mountains and looked at the rainswathed peaks about us with distaste. I reserved (somewhat unfairly perhaps) the same expression for our transport. If this was the reaction to
an Austrian Alp, how were we going to negotiate some of the wild
mountain tracks ahead?

In Villach, last stop in Austria, we decided to review our equip-ment again,
as we were still carrying too much. We became ruthless this time, weeding
out everything considered surplus, which really meant most of our spare
clothing. We retained only absolute necessities, even sacrificing our
gauntlet gloves-hoping they would shortly be unnecessary-and my
shooter's telescope. Our list was now depleted almost alarmingly. One two-
man tent, two sleeping-bags, cine-camera and film, a couple of writing
pads; a very small first-aid kit, an equally minute ditty bag for Nita's odds
and ends, a couple of macintoshes and two pullovers; one set of spare
underclothing each, one 35 mm. still-camera, a set of tools and spare parts
for our steed; and apart from our dixie and Primus and a few little extras
this was virtually the lot.

Villach housed the last of the European NSU agents, one Fritz
Mayerhoffer, who got his mechanics to go over the Prima for a final check
and had us installed in one of the town's inns. I told him about the ghastly
scramble over what should have been the Gross Glockner. He laughed - a
bit heartily I thought - at my description of our plight on the heights, but
eased my mind some-what by saying that he doubted if we would ever find
its equal for steepness. We had stumbled on one of the stiffest climbs in all
Europe apparently, and perhaps the world. In countries with ample space,
he went on to explain, they could build roads around the mountains, but in
Austria there was no room to do this, so one had to go over the tops.
Relieved by this explanation, but allowing for national pride regarding the
bit about 'the stiffest in the world', some of my worries evaporated and we
plodded off to enjoy a good night's sleep at the inn. This was a rather odd
estab-lishment, with house-martins nesting on the first-floor landing and,
in our room, an enormous, hideously painted stove which took up a quarter
of the room and reached from floor to ceiling. Anyone wintering there
would assuredly be roasted alive. But we couldn't complain at forty
schillings (about eleven shillings) a night. We sank gratefully into a huge
feather bed and, apart from a dream I had in which Herr Mayerhoffer - who
had a long thin body, unruly hair, and an elongated nose - was rolling a
hideously painted stove down on to Nita and me as we tried to ride up an
endless mountain, I knew no more until morning.

Heavy rain and severe thunderstorms heralded our entry into Yugoslavia
two days later. Another night in the mountains, this time under canvas, had left us cold, wet, and disagreeable. The tent, saturated, had doubled its normal weight and was awkward to pack. At seven a.m. as we approached the frontier post, murky skies and a low temperature reminded us more of November than July. I was certain they would keep us for hours at the barrier.

But no, we were lucky. Formalities completed, schillings turned into dinars and we were away in ten minutes. A good road, the skies clearing (one is acutely weather-conscious on two wheels), and Ljubljana our lunch-time objective, we had the highway to ourselves. Nothing passed us in either direction for over an hour. Delightful. On either side stretched farming country backed with cloud-veiled mountains. Our route lay in a valley between two ranges, and was flat and level at long last, for which we were thankful. We passed a number of small, fenced-off memorials at the side of the road. On the stone faces of the crosses were inserted photographs of the dead, with their names and villages inscribed beneath. Some of the photographs dated back to 1911, yet the images were quite clear. This form of remembrance seemed rather a nice custom.

Ljubljana is a garrison town, and as we invariably arrived at all major towns and cities at week-ends, or public holidays, it was not surprising to find all the shops shut and the streets empty. It was, in fact, Saturday afternoon. The town was a fair size and widespread; as we approached the centre there were a few groups of men strolling about, most of them in uniform reminiscent in style of the British Army, vintage 1914. They were friendly, and we found ourselves waving frequently. For the first time we had real language difficulty. We drove round and round until one old fellow from his seat on a front porch—after seeing us pass for the third time—pointed up a side road. We found the garage and refuelled. There were no food shops open, and we were hungry, so Nita approached the back door of an hotel. After ten minutes she reappeared with some cold meats (assorted), a kind of Russian salad in a cardboard box, and half a loaf of wholemeal bread. The proprietors had been very obliging and their charges were nominal for this favour.

There was little in the way of motor traffic in the city, and bicycles seemed to be the most popular form of transport. They looked happy Communists, the people we saw. Not colourful in their dress but quite adequately attired; certainly no sort of rich living was evident but everything looked
comfortably solid. There were one or two pleasant squares of grass in the city and houses were clean and neat, though small. One could neither boast nor complain of Ljubljana. Not, at least, until the outskirts were reached and with them the Zagreb road.

This road soon deteriorated into a narrow, chalky track. I thought at first that it was a detour (despite the A.A. warnings), and expected any moment to get back on to tarmac. The hope was short-lived, however, and we resigned ourselves to the cart track which was to take us 130 kilometres towards Zagreb. We bumped and skidded onwards, being engulfed in choking dust every time the odd truck or car passed. After an hour of this torture, we cried quits and sat down, well away from the road, to eat our food from the hotel. The white shimmering road looked ghostly and uninviting, stretching away between the green hills, with its lime-coated trees lining either side. Yugoslav roads in the summer are inclined to be very dusty, said the A.A. How right they were. I suggested our usual antidote to tough stretches and Nita was in full agreement. We would make a night drive. So at four o'clock, we arranged the sleeping-bags and after a mug each of hot strong tea, we lay down to sleep for a few hours. My last view of the road in daylight was a depressing one: a truck bump-ing and crashing its way over the corrugations and pot-holes, leaving a huge dust-pall hanging motionless in the air as evidence of its passing.

Well, there it lay before us: the first really arduous part. So far it had been easy - save for the one short hazard in the Austrian Alps - but by the next morning, when we hoped to be in Zagreb, we should know whether we had been over-optimistic in our choice of transport. The first trial was imminent, and as the rugged Bal-kans loomed ahead, the holiday atmosphere began at last to recede.
Pink Sky at Night (Chapter 3 - Zagreb, Yugoslavia)

That night drive from Ljubljana to Zagreb was an experience indeed. We awoke from our nap at about eight o'clock, fortified ourselves with more tea, and mounted to do battle. For about a hundred yards we progressed very well, then hit a yawning pot-hole that would be better described as a pit, promptly wobbled out of control, lost balance, and fell off. Travelling slowly, there was no damage done, but the incident was a caution. At an even slower pace, after a futile dusting down, we resumed. This time there was an improvement and we covered about a mile before repeating the performance. Those pot-holes were demoralizing brutes. There was absolutely no method of avoiding all the chasms; we had to take them in our stride. It was almost impossible to discern just where they lay, for the headlight was dazzling on the white surface and we were in trouble before it could be prevented.

Sometimes we managed to scud along for as many as two or three miles with barely a dent to be felt, then, suddenly there were craters everywhere. Luckily these seemed to con-form to a regular pattern and as our anxious peering eyes spotted the first of a new series, Nita would shout (just in case I hadn't seen them) 'More!' and we could take evasive action. This consisted simply of attacking the pitted area in first gear, weaving our way over what was left of the original surface. The Prima took the severe punishment well. There was a nice floating action from the hydraulically damped rear suspension (which worked to the limits of its travel due to the overweight), and although the passage was extremely choppy, there were no worrying noises from any part of the machine save for an occasional 'clunk' as the front-wheel springing bottomed. I began to enjoy that ride. We were overcoming the first hurdle. It was a lovely night, moon-less, but with plenty of stars and quite warm. Unlike our journey so far, for the first time there were no twinkling lights on either side and the few small villages we passed through were in total darkness, except for the inns. At one of these we sampled the potent slivovitz. One glass is more than enough to keep out the chill night air and two are a guaranteed anaesthetic. With the red-hot coals smouldering in our stomachs we left the bar which was austere, womanless, but lively in a rural way; a medley of tobacco smoke, sawdust, cloth caps, and boots and a burble of animated chatter of which I could decipher but one word, 'da' (yes).

Confident now, we attacked again and, surprisingly, had no more spills that night. We hastened slowly, stopping every hour to stretch our legs and
smoke a cigarette, refuelling from the re-serve tank once; and so, as the hours passed, the miles of tortuous track passed with them.

At three o'clock in the morning we suddenly ran on to heavenly metalled road again, the beginning of the 'Autoput' which, according to the map, would take us through Zagreb and, blessedly, right on to Belgrade. Dead tired, we pulled off the road -the real road- made a rough camp, and in twenty minutes were falling into a deep, dreamless sleep. Night driving in Yugoslavia would cure the most advanced case of insomnia.

The tramp of marching feet awakened me, and across the top of my dew-soaked sleeping-bag I could see a host of white-clad figures passing. Rubbing my eyes and staring with disbelief at a watch that said five a.m., I looked again at the phantom army marching through the billowing dawn mist. They were women, despite the clump of their boots. Peasants in Sunday attire of stiff white dresses and starched bonnets, ornate with traditional decorations, on their way to the market at Zagreb. Laughing and chattering among themselves, carrying huge baskets of produce on their heads, these sturdy countrywomen politely looked straight ahead as they passed the parked scooter and the two cocoons huddled side by side on the grass verge. There was a lull of a few minutes between groups, so during the slack period in this pedestrian traffic we hastily shed our sleeping-bags and got dressed.

While Nita brewed up on the Primus, I watched another batch go past. Strong, healthy women with a glow in their cheeks, wholesome people who live close to the earth, these were no Communists, Titoists, or any other 'ists'. They were Croats, doing much the same as they had done for centuries. I felt certain, watching them stride past, that their lives had remained untouched through Turkish rule, German domination, or their current choice; untouched, that is, so far as loyalties went. The peasant was dictated to only by the earth; the land, that commands more devotion than any human being, a hard master at times, but one which rarely repays confidence with empty promises.

In Zagreb on that Sunday morning, we met an Englishman. Among shops with no display windows and weird names (which of course were unreadable to us), we were searching as usual for a food shop. Nita really
wanted a butcher. It was time, she said, that we had another quota of fresh
meat. We rolled along slowly, peering through narrow, gloomy doorways,
some of which were open, despite the strong Catholic influence in that part
of Yugoslavia. Behind us a car-horn blew and I looked around to see a
man in a new Austin waving to us. I tried to recollect whom we knew in
Zagreb, could think of no one and decided to stop any-way. The driver
pulled in behind us and got out.

'How do,' he said by way of introduction. 'You're a bit off the beaten track,
aren't you?'

'We were last night,' I agreed.

'Ah, then you'll have come from "Lubli", will you?'

'That's right.'

'A real cruel bit 0' road is that; still, you're on a good thing from 'ere to
Belgrade. What they call the "Autoput", y'know.' I nodded.

'Course, I know this country backwards by now; come out every year and
stay about three months. Do a little bit 0' business 'ere and there.' Here he
winked knowingly at Nita. She smiled back at him non-committally, and I
visualized all sorts of illegal dealings covered by his 'bit 0' business'.

'We'd really like to find a butcher,' I said. 'You wouldn't happen to know of
one hereabouts, would you?' He laughed.

'You'll have to keep your eyes open 'ere, lad; what's that be'ind you?' I
turned round and there, not twenty paces away, was a tell-tale sawdust trail
from a narrow doorway.

'Oh, yes,' I said, somewhat ungraciously. 'Thanks.'

Our fellow countryman looked over the scooter and told us that his
daughter back home' ran one 0' them'. 'But you're bein' a bit ambitious, ain't
you?'

'We are if the Yugoslav money exchange is a sample of the countries
ahead,' I told him. Our friend eyed us with a shrewd look, then decided to
take us into his confidence.

'Look' ere,' he said with a hasty glance round the near-empty street, 'have you changed much since you've been 'ere?' We told him we hadn't.

'Good, then I'll give you a tip; I've got a pal in Belgrade-Yugo, but he's O.K.-goes by the name 0' Brodski. He's nearly always in the Hotel Moscow; fat fella wi' crinkly hair. Now then, have a word with 'im and say Tom Briggs sent you. He'll fix you up wi' a cracking bit of exchange. Don't have no truck with travel agencies if you take my advice.'

We said we'd think about it and thanked him for the informa-tion.

'S'nothin', glad to 'elp.' He glanced at his watch. 'Well, must get back into harness. Gotta see a chap at half-past ten, not 'ere for me 'ealth, y'know. Might see somethin' of you in Belgrade, I'm always popping in and out.'

'Right,' we said, 'And thanks again.' We waved as the Austin disappeared round a corner. Trooping into the butcher's shop, we bought two pieces of prime steak, got the butcher to fill our new water bottles, and without further ado drove out on to the Autoput and settled down to cover the two hundred and fifty miles to Belgrade.
Pink Sky at Night (Chapter 3 - Belgrade, Yugoslavia)

It was monotonous driving along the valley of the River Sava. And as we cruised along at a steady thirty-five miles per hour, with flat, marshy ground stretching for miles on either side of the concrete highway, I had plenty of time to reflect on the advice given us by the man in Zagreb. 'Look for a Fat Man in the Hotel Moscow' sounded shady and full of intrigue, even Orson Wellesian. Why would the man with crinkly hair want to give us more for our cheques than they were officially worth? It didn't add up. The official rate of exchange was 1,120 dinars to the pound sterling; our tipster had hinted at something much higher than that figure. It sounded attractive but risky. I shouted above the headwind to my wife. 'What do you think about meeting the Fat Man in Belgrade?' 'Not much,' she yelled back, 'it sounds a bit dangerous. I'm not keen to see the inside of a Yugoslav prison.' 'Nor I,' I bawled, 'but maybe it's sort of within the law. We certainly could make use of a more favourable exchange. Might be worth trying to see him, then if it's obviously illegal we can back out gracefully.' Nita, undecided on this diplomacy, wavered. 'Well...' So we left it open. We'd get to Belgrade first.

The Croatian countryside was dotted with villages, marshes, and a tremendous variety of bird life: duck and geese, both wild and tame, herons and smaller waders searching for fish among the reeds, flocks of rooks and pigeons. And although we saw little of the River Sava itself, the whole area, flat as a board, was soggy and insect-infested, a veritable bird paradise. On the far-distant horizons to left and right, purple mountains hemmed in the valley of damp. Bad country for camping, so we drove on through an insect-plagued dusk and far into the night.

We camped eventually in a meagre copse that was wet and uncomfortable, and Nita kept hearing footsteps approaching; I was glad when dawn broke and we could see our surroundings. Desolate fenland, heavy with mist. Even in daylight it was a gloomy spot.

We were still on the Autoput, though the Belgrade signposts did not now display such a formidable number of kilometres. All that day we drove without seeing more than a handful of people working in the fields and a dozen cars or so on the motor-road. Garages were few and far between, about fifty miles between each.

Towards evening, dog-tired after a hard day's riding, we were thinking
longingly of a cosy camping spot, when the engine began to misfire—
the usual trouble of plug-whiskering. I stopped to clean it and in the middle of
the operation we were pounced upon by a bunch of knowledge-thirsty
students, three young men and four girls all in their 'teens or early twenties.
They spoke passable English and were excellent company. The ten-minute
delay developed into a heated three-hour discussion on the various merits
and faults of Communism and capitalism. They were all well read, with a
shrewd conception of world affairs, perhaps a trifle misinformed in some
respects, but tremendously interested in international politics and willing to
assess our views dispassionately. However, they were unanimous in their
respect for the British; three of them were even taking English instead of
Russian as a second language. But unfortunately for this cross-section of
the unified Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, their learning was unlikely to be
broadened by travel. For apart from the lack of funds, they told us, it was
almost impossible to secure passports. Not that these documents were ever
actually withheld, but the formalities were so exhausting that applicants
usually lost heart or ran out of stamp money. It was, they said, just not
worth the effort. Perhaps, in a country striving to build and become
prosperous, that is a good thing. If these boys and girls were an average
cross-section of modern Yugoslavia they would be a great loss to their
country.

It was again very late before we selected our open-air bedroom for the
night, and by that time we were yearning for a good night's sleep. After the
third day of fresh air, with only sparse patches of rest, we were prepared to
sleep anywhere; so we did, about three yards from the road on the gravel
verge.

We never found the man in the Hotel Moscow. How could we? During the
whole time we were in the city—nearly a week—the hotel and its immediate
environs, including a super-colossal boule-yard cafe, were always teeming
with jostling crowds. It seemed to be the social hub of Belgrade. And a
surprising number of the men who sat at the pavement tables sipping and
chatting were fat, crinkly-haired, and suitably furtive. We forsook the crazy
idea and gave our custom rather reluctantly to Putnik, the Yugoslav travel
agency.

We had enough trouble as it was, trying to coax Jugosped, the transport
company, to release our new film stock which had been flown out from
London; and at long last when that favour was finally granted, we had to
start over again to persuade them that the exposed film, which we wanted
returned to England by air, was not of their military installations, bridges, or factories. All this was finally accomplished by Nita, who threw aside all polite business procedure and ranted at the company director in no un-certain manner: did they want to trade with Britain? Because if so, they were hardly setting a good example by all this needless red-tape!

She said a lot of other things too, but I didn't hear them, for while this last desperate parleying was in progress I made a cowardly withdrawal to another office to fill in another sheaf of forms and smoulder in impotent fury. I must have completed hundreds in those four days, which was not easy as they were, of course, all in Yugoslav. During these negotiations to wrest our film from the clutches of officialdom and get them to accept the ex-posed stock for dispatch, we visited nearly every government office in the capital, accompanied by a young girl from the Jugosped office, to try and gain the necessary permission. Some of the forms, I was certain from the interpreted questions, could not have had the slightest bearing on the problem. My grandfather's Christian names, for instance, could hardly clinch the matter one way or another. Questions, forms, more questions.

'Why haven't you carried all the film you needed with you?'

'Because we are riding a scooter-weight and bulk, you know.'

'Pardon?' they said, with puzzled frowns.

'Newsreel material-London. Its prompt return is urgent.' 'Newsreel?' they said, 'British Government Newsreel? What have you taken pictures of? Have you travelled through any of the military zones?'

'No,' I replied. 'Scooted via Ljubljana and Zagreb and taken some scenic shots.' And so on, for four days.

In the middle of all this jousting I got an attack of gout, a legacy from a port-fancying grandfather, the same whose name now reposed in the archives of Belgrade. Fortunately, the most excruciating period coincided with our exhausting but triumphant conclusion of the film fantasy, so that I could hobble, gratefully relieved, back to the small hotel bedroom to endure the following two days of agony in peace. Nita fed me my usual non-alcoholic diet; stayed away from my foot, the big toe of which was then a superb, pulsating specimen the colour of an angry sunset; and kept
the conversation down to a minimum. No one with severe gout is good to live with. The only light relief during this trying interlude was a letter from Rediffusion, which expressed concern at the delay in the arrival of film. After doses of colchicum tablets, my fiery toe subsided after forty-eight hours and once again was pronounced fit to press the foot brake.

We spent our last evening in Belgrade shopping in a market which stayed open until very late in the evening. The city centre was well lit, with a surprising amount of traffic in evidence, more than during the day, and multi-storeyed buildings, bathed in floodlight, punctuating the skyline. Some of the city—the older quarter—showed a distinct Turkish influence, but all that seemed to be overshadowed by the new building projects. There were plenty of essential consumer goods, but positively no luxuries. For example, we passed many jewellers' shops displaying watch-straps but no watches, and in most of the windows were articles strictly utilitarian: lengths of gas piping, a telephone tastefully set up against a coloured crepe-paper surround, and in yet another shop a few angle-iron brackets (non-rusting).

Yet for all the austerity, people seemed to move with purpose and springiness of step. Gradually, they said, the results of the five-year plans were taking effect. We heard one or two hinted asides that Tito was not quite all he could be, but most of the English-speaking people we talked to during that week supported the country's leader wholeheartedly, indeed, fervently. They had faith in him and in themselves. They were working, they told us, to create a prosperous and independent Yugoslavia. What did we think of the beautiful architecture of the new buildings? Were they not symbolic of the new country, with their glass and concrete silhouettes breaking the old, low skyline? Soon, too, all the major cities would be connected by the Autoput, and the dusty tracks would be but memories to the next generation. We both thought this last an excellent idea.

Certainly Belgrade today, built from the rubble of the Luft-waffe's savage onslaught, was proof of a national will to keep up with the world beyond the Balkans. Compared with Austria, their neighbour, they were poor; poor but proud, hardworking and eager. I liked the Yugoslavs and their country, despite the bureaucracy, the exchange rate, the gout, and the incident when I was nearly thrown into prison for filming a tramp in the city centre. The people we met, almost without exception, were friendly, helpful, and smilingly cheerful; I hope it will not be long before they can walk into their
jewellers' shops to buy themselves wrist-watches. And their politics? As one man said, they are neo-Communist because for them it holds the key to recovery; they are not fanatical about the creed, just quietly convinced that it is the right way. For their country's infancy it probably is: a parallel to our own maxim that a student must be a radical, before toning down his views with substance and maturity.

Over the Danube and out from Belgrade the road, at first metalled, deteriorated rapidly and, apart from a few tarmac stretches which seemed to end hardly before they had begun, was a trialist's delight. For us it was murderous. A repeat of the Ljubljana-Zagreb run, only worse. There were no smooth, restful part, it was all holes, huge cavities filled with dust and jagged flinty rocks which were unavoidable at times. When these gave out temporarily, we had variety in the form of deep, even corrugations from which there was no escape at all. The only difference in the country was the appearance of Cyrillic instead of Roman script on the infrequent signposts. The road, particularly near villages, was usually lined with apple trees. So much more practical than poplars or planes as shade-makers, they were heavily laden with fruit. I wondered how long they would have remained thus in rural England.

The mountain country of eastern Yugoslavia is really wild. Cultivation near the villages is intensive, but between communities we rode through remote moorlands and craggy peaks, with only wild birds, cattle, and sheep as our companions. We could look towards every horizon and see nothing but virgin landscape, rugged but green.

We camped in some lovely spots, almost always finding a fresh, babbling stream and soft mosses on which to lay our sleeping-bags. I managed to get a fair amount of shooting and for a while we practically gave up tinned food as the dixie was usually full of game for the evening meal. But however remote the surroundings, after sunset we never managed to be alone. Magically, it seemed, we would find ourselves with company. Sometimes an individual would introduce himself, chat by miming, and generally make himself comfortable. But if the guests were in a party they often confined their visit, which sometimes lasted for as much as three hours, to silent, bovine stares. Very disconcerting. One night a shepherd boy—who was, I suspect, leading contender for the title of Village Idiot—stayed all night, sleeping just outside the tent flap. He spoke one word which he repeated hopefully at opportune intervals: 'Cigaretten.' He was
still mumbling his German vocabulary as I fell asleep with one hand on the rifle, just in case.

On we went through the desolate, attractive mountains, winding our tiny way through gigantic gashes in the hills, up to the beginning of the majestic, barren Dragoman Pass, and on along the narrow path that led across the natural barrier between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. We camped on top of a bare, windswept peak. Ahead in the valley below lay more of the unknown, which in a few hours would be revealed to us. The evening sky, a delicate, pastel pink towards the west, held promise of a fine day for the morrow. A good omen.
Red in the Morning (Chapter 4 - Bulgarian border)

There were a hundred yards of no-man's-land. Through the trees along the rutted, sunlit track, we saw the Bulgarian border. It was seven-thirty a.m. We started the scooter and ran out of Yugoslavia and into the buffer strip of land between the two countries. For those hundred or so yards, we were politically nowhere. It was a peculiar feeling, those few moments in limbo. I felt that had we stopped and set up camp we could probably have stayed in that strategic vacuum, acknowledged by neither government, for ever. Ahead, to left and right, a stout wire fence marked the Bulgarian frontier. We drove up to a chequered barrier, stopped the engine and waited.

From a whitewashed hut stepped a uniformed double of Peter Ustinov, much as he appeared in The Love of Four Colonels. He opened the barrier and, in broken English that was almost as funny as the play, said:

'Hullow, travellers. Please insides; signings.'

We nodded, parked the scooter and followed his ample, heavily belted frame back into the hut.

'Passaporrta please.'

He flung down his red-starred cap and settled comfortably behind a big desk that sported a dusty ink-well and an ancient hand-crank telephone. He indicated two hard-backed chairs for our pleasure and immediately fell to a most thorough examination of our precious document. Above and behind him, two faded portraits stared down, it seemed directly at Nita and me, with what appeared to be faintly disapproving expressions. One was Lenin, the other, surprisingly, was Josef Stalin, edged in black.

I looked about me but the rest of the room was empty save for a very old office safe, upon which I could just make out the 'Made in England' trademark. We sat in silence, waiting for the end of the perusal. After twenty minutes, the officer looked up with a beaming smile.

'This one passaporrta not good.'

'Oh,' said I, thinking that all the pessimists back home had perhaps been right after all, 'what's wrong with it?' I tried to adopt a suitably aggressive
tone in accord with that line on the passport flyleaf regarding 'Without Let or Hindrance'. But it was no use. Tapping the document against his thumb, he launched into a long, barely understandable explanation, which briefly revealed the trouble: apparently everything was in order so far as we personally were concerned, but the passport visa mentioned nothing about a motor-scooter.

I tried to explain that all the formalities regarding our transport were covered by the carnet - I flourished the fat booklet at him - but this was sadly insufficient. It should be in the 'passaportta'; he was pleasant, apologetic, but firm. We would have to wait while he rang through to Sofia. If they granted permission, we would be able to proceed; if not, we would have to return to Yugoslavia. (He indicated this with a disparaging directional nod of the head.)

Nita immediately went outside and returned with the map case. She gave me an I-told-you-so look, as she began totting up the mileage to Turkey via Yugoslavia and Greece. I watched anxiously as our Peter Ustinov cranked vigorously at the telephone. He eventually got through to somewhere and after a few minutes' conversation which consisted mostly of the word dobra, he hung up and sat back with a contented smile. Sofia, he said in effect, would ring back within a few minutes with the necessary permission. In the meantime we were offered a glass of water and given cigarettes to pass away the time. It was just eight o'clock.

At two p.m. the poor man, who now looked less like Ustinov, was as fed up with the sight of us as we were with him and his wretched frontier post. He had certainly done his best to entertain, but after six hours he had run clean out of ideas. We had been on a tour of the garrison, including the barn-like soldiers' quarters and the vegetable patch, and walked round and round the postage-stamp lawn in front of the building. We had washed at the well, after superhuman efforts to draw water, and cleaned our boots of some of the thick dust which clung so tenaciously. The scooter had been repacked several times as a sort of occupational therapy and stood waiting outside the guardroom door. Still no permission.

At four o'clock, the last strained smile had been smiled and we all sat glumly and silently, chins in hands, watching and willing that telephone to ring. At four-thirty the quiet was broken by our captor with strange noises which turned out to be an invitation to eat with the rest of the frontier
guard. We all adjourned to the barn and there joined the rest of the troops who were noisily engaged in drinking bowls of watery soup and eating mountains of dry bread. Nita and I took our indicated places at the long scrubbed table and conjuring up expressions of surprised delight, managed to swallow the luke-warm gruel and some of the ancient bread. For a pudding, we each received a small block of what appeared to be, and tasted like, solidified jam; quite pleasant, by far the nicest course, but very, very sweet.

Afterwards, we returned to the guardroom for what fortunately turned out to be the last half-hour of waiting. At five o'clock, exactly nine and a half hours after arrival, we were given permission to proceed. We went post-haste, anxious to reach Sofia sixty miles away before nightfall. We had learned our first lesson. Communist government departments had a lot in common with our own; but at least they supplied refreshments.
The road surface to Sofia was perfect. Some tarmac, some well-laid cobbles, but all smooth and in first-class condition. The cobbles in fact were so well fitted that not the slightest bump was transmitted through the scooter frame. We made very good time to the capital, exuberant at our release from the frontier guards and from the exhausting business of negotiating rough Yugoslav tracks. Rolling pastures flanked the empty road ahead. We saw three other vehicles between the border and the capital, two of them party-member cars flying hammer-and-sickle pennants, and the third an ancient open army staff car with disc wheels. The only people we passed in the whole sixty miles were a group of road menders, most of whom were women, buxom lasses, heaving picks and shovels under the eye of a male foreman. They paused, statue-like, in their labours to stare at the sight of our unfamiliar vehicle. We gave them a cheery wave and a pip-pip on the horn, sailing gracefully past at a steady forty miles an hour.

We had a lot more trouble in Sofia. We arrived just as the banks were closing, which was unfortunate, because we had only Yugoslav dinars in our pockets. However, I managed to squeeze my way inside one of the imposing buildings and to catch one of the tellers. So the trouble started. They could not give us leva for dinars. I argued, in English; they shook their Bulgarian heads and remained passive. The manager arrived. No, it was not possible; what good were Yugoslav dinars? In desperation I offered him one of our travellers' cheques. Still no good. He looked dispassionately at the cheque book, it was obvious he was not going to exchange good leva for a leaf of that worthless paper. More mumbling until I detected the words 'British Legation' uttered in French. We made more signs, talked a lot of mutually unintelligible gibberish, then the harassed man was smitten with the bright idea. He picked up a 'phone directory, riffled through the pages, then rang a number. A ten-minute pause, then he handed the instrument over.

'Hullo,' I sighed wearily, 'is that the British Legation?'

'It is, and what sort of trouble are you in, old chap?'

Oh that glorious Anglo-Saxon voice. My morale soared.

'Money trouble and our plight is desperate; we can't change our Yugoslav
dinars and the Lloyds Bank cheques are apparently not too popular.'

'Uh, huh,' said the friendly, dark-brown English voice. 'Where are you? No, that's silly of me, you probably haven't a clue.' I acknowledged that.

'Put me on to the manager again for a moment, will you?' More burblings and a lot of dobra's. I was handed the 'phone again.

'Wait outside the bank, one of our chaps will be along in about fifteen minutes, you can't miss the car - he'll guide you along here to the Legation - we'll see if we can arrange something.'

With another sigh, this time of contentment, I replaced the receiver. Outside, Nita and the scooter had disappeared inside a vast crowd of people, who were milling around talking loudly and excitedly. I hastened through the crush, faintly alarmed at this unprecedented Sofia reception. In the centre of the milling throng, my wife was doing her best to stand upright. She looked very relieved as I forced myself inside the human barrier.

'Thank God you've come; this is quite an ordeal.'

'It's all fixed,' I gasped, 'the Legation are sending a car round to pilot us in.'

We were both by now pressed hard against the scooter by the pushing of late-comers on the fringe of the crowd. I felt slightly apprehensive. There were these hundreds of faces, serious, neutral of countenance, gazing unwinkingly at us, our clothes, the scooter, and the equipment. We could speak no Bulgarian and they no English. But it was very easy to understand their interest. We were something from 'the other side', and this cross-section of the population, men, women, and children of all ages, were obviously measuring up this practical example of capitalism against their theoretical knowledge. On that reception, we passed their critical examination with flying colours. For a start, our little scooter was something unusual, to say the least; they marvelled at the finish, the cleanliness of line, the complete absence of visible machinery, at the quietness of the engine; there were gasps of wonderment as I pressed the self-starter. They were obviously impressed with the dash-panel too, probably the first they'd seen on a two-wheeled machine.
But it was our own clothing and equipment which really fascinated them. Without embarrassment they fingered the sleeves of our skin jackets, admired our boots, and repeatedly touched the fabric of our rolled tent and sleeping-bags. Quality was plainly at a premium in this little country. Almost all the onlookers were clothed in drab, thin-looking, inferior garments. There was not one splash of bright colour. Beyond the crowd one or two cars passed by, but traffic—particularly for a capital city—was extremely light. We had no trouble in identifying the Legation car. Thankfully we started up, while a dozen faces within inches of our own continued to stare unblinking at our every move; it was hard to keep up a steady disinterested gaze into the middle distance. The car hooted, the crowd reluctantly made a lane, and we pulled out of the crush.

The British Legation in Sofia stood on a once-affluent tree-lined avenue. Opposite, an ostensibly empty house concealed a swarm of khaki-clad figures: a convenient site for military surveillance of the comings and goings in the British stronghold on the other side of the road. There were a number of faces pressed to the windows as we drew up and stopped.

Mr Constant and his charming wife at once made us at home with refreshments and that blessed thing, the English language. How pleasant to relax in comfortable leather armchairs, surrounded by familiar furnishings, with two people who could understand every word and inflection of our voices. Exactly six weeks after leaving England, we spent the night 'camping' on the floor of this English living-room in Sofia. We slept soundly on the carpeted boards, until about half past two in the morning, when suddenly our sleep was shattered by the most hideous metal rumbling from the street outside. I leaped out of my sleeping-bag and rushed to the windows and there twenty feet below, glistening under dim street lamps, were three tanks, line astern, rattling their inexorable way down the avenue. The noise those caterpillar tracks made over the cobblestones was deafening and quite frightening at such an hour. I could just make out the heads and shoulders of the tank commanders, featureless in large berets and goggles. It took a quarter of an hour for the clatter to die away in the distance, and we returned to our sleeping-bags, wondering.

Next morning we got an explanation from Mr Constant. It did not make us too happy. There had been an unofficial whisper of political trouble—an uprising of some sort—in Plovdiv, the next town on our route. He thought it unwise for us to leave the capital until something had been confirmed. The
tanks that passed in the night had been on their way to the trouble spot. But, we learned, they often embarked on a night prowl from time to time even without an excuse—all part of the intimidation tactics. They knew full well the value of waking the populace in the dead of night with their palpitating clatter.
Red in the Morning (Chapter 4 - Bulgaria to Turkey)
Our one-night stay at the Legation lengthened into a long week-end, a week-end in which we learned a good deal about this satellite of Soviet Russia. Open-minded about Communism and a little sceptical of Press propaganda, I was interested to see whether in fact the system was as black as it was painted. In these four days I saw enough to last me for the rest of my life. The whole social structure is dominated by the military, and uniformed men seem to make up most of the population. Food and clothing are very scarce and of poor quality; petrol, at the equivalent of £ 1 per gallon, is muddy black and just about burnable. It is, of course, rationed and one has to search pretty thoroughly for a petrol station, even in Sofia. Bulgaria is a country where a rich man owns a bicycle.

Wherever we went, our number plate was recorded every five miles by a police watching-post, and deviation from the main road was strictly forbidden. Villages are afflicted with remote-control loudspeakers in the squares which blare forth unwanted martial music for the best part of every day, and every public amenity, from cattle-troughs to park benches and public lavatories, is stamped with the red star and a built-in plaque enjoining the Happy Workers to be thankful for the benevolence of the Glorious State.

We spent our last day, Sunday, with the Constant family on a picnic drive to a picturesque dam about twenty miles from the city. The man-made lake created in this flooded valley was a week-end magnet, and Sunday morning was the time for a mass-exodus by the townspeople. They are great walkers, the Bulgarians; indeed, they have to be. We passed group after group striding along the road towards the lake: twenty miles there and twenty back. Strenuous work for one day, but they all seemed fit and there was a lot of laughter, which we hadn't seen in the town. The men were nearly all stripped to the waist, carrying their shirts and soaking up the hot sun. The road was long and dusty, but the cool waters were reward enough for the long hike. I doubt if we should have enjoyed the day so much if we had had to hike back to Sofia. Half-way home, one of the hikers thumbed a lift. We gave him one and dropped him off in the city centre. He was very gallant and insisted on shaking hands with the driver and me and kissing the hands of the women. With a last sweeping bow he backed away and disappeared.

'A brave man,' said the Vice-Consul. 'That's the first time anyone has dared
to accept a lift from me. If the police saw him getting out of a Legation car, he'll have a lot of awkward questions to answer.'

'But surely it's not as bad as that, is it?' I queried.

'You've no conception of life here,' said the Vice-Consul, but he would not elaborate and continued on a lighter note.

'Things are easing a little, though. Not so long ago it was forbidden to make the trip we did today, for instance. And there are not so many road checks now. But my wife's maid still has to shop black-market to buy edible meat, and report once a week to a certain someone who checks on our activities. It is ostensibly a visit to the doctor, but we know where she really goes; and she knows we know, but still the farce has to be enacted once a week regularly.' He concluded on a note of hope. 'But still, things are getting better.'

Our Yugoslav dinars at last changed to Bulgarian leva, we left the Legation on the Monday morning. Apparently the uprising rumour had been just a rumour. Bathed, fresh and clean, with our spare clothing washed and ironed at the thoughtful suggestion of our hostess, we took down last-minute addresses of these people who in the short space of a week-end had become good friends; we waved good-bye and sped off down the tree-lined avenue. Faces were still glued to the windows of the house opposite. Plovdiv would be our next big town.

Along the way we met many Bulgarian villagers which made a change from our lonely run from the border. Some of the older ones, when the excitement of inspecting our strangeness had passed, tried to talk to us in odd words of English and German, and by miming. But somehow there was always a policeman on the scene who, with a curt nod of the head, discouraged any fraternizing. We did manage to have a chat with one Bulgarian about thirty miles from Plovdiv. We had stopped in the middle of a night drive to brew up by the roadside, when a motor-cyclist pulled in, presumably thinking we needed assistance. Within a few minutes we were squatting round the Primus giving the news-hungry visitor, who spoke quite passable English, an unabridged report of the outside world. He told us that before the war he had been a prosperous factory owner, today he was paid just enough money to exist from one pay-day to the next. But, we reminded him, he was still pretty well off to own a motor-cycle. He gave a
laconic grin and glanced at the machine. 'Oh, that belongs to an army officer. I'm a mechanic working overtime. It's out on test, that's all.'

That night, as we camped near Plovdiv, I began thinking about home and how well off our own people really were. They grumble about rising prices, weather, and the hundred and one other little complaints that make up the average Englishman's day, but in Bulgaria the problems of Mr Everyman are far more serious. He has to find something like £50 to get himself a winter coat, in England a comfort, in Bulgaria a necessity. The standard of living—never high—is now lower than almost anywhere else in Europe. What to us are elementary needs, to the average Bulgarian are inaccessible dreams, for the truth is that this unhappy country has been wrung dry by her Russian overlords. Nita and I sped on through the night, anxious to cross the border at first light the following morning. The past few days had spelled 'finish' to any sympathy I might have felt towards such a regime.

Through a rambling village-Svilengrad—an anxious moment while the customs searched one of the pannier-bags (fortunately not the camera and film bag), a curt nod, and we were past the barrier into Turkey. For the first time in days we felt really free again.
From a cloudless sky the sun blazed down on the cluster of frontier buildings and the dusty track winding away into a distance of brown, treeless semi-desert. The officials spoke English of a sort and welcomed us warmly, if a little incoherently. There were one or two Turkish soldiers lounging about outside the customs. Tough, squat-looking fellows, completely without spit and polish of any kind, they looked very efficient for all that. While we were changing our money a large dust-smeared car, with a crumpled front wing, pulled up and disgorged a middle-aged English couple who had just made the overland trip from Kuwait. Both were pretty hostile towards Turkey because the exchange had proved so unfavourable. They had stopped for one night at an hotel in Istanbul and paid £10 for the privilege. From their description, it must have been just about the plushiest hotel in the city, but still we thought this sounded a bit dear for an eight-hour stop. They were anxious to know about Bulgaria and we gave them what information we could on conditions. These two overlanders were in for some shocks if they thought Turkey costly. I was thankful that our petrol needs had been no more than three gallons; at £1 a gallon it had proved very painful buying.

I dared not stand and look at that discouraging track too long and was anxious to get started; those Australian aborigines seemed a long way off, farther, somehow, even than when we had started. We reached Edirne at lunch-time and got a friendly reception from a crowd of little urchins who pelted us with stones. We ran through the barrage unscathed and did the next half-mile with our heads well down. When we finally looked up, it was to behold a most impressive sight: Edirne, Turkish city of minarets and dazzling white domes-hundreds of them dotting the horizon, their beautiful outlines looking cool and inviting under the scorching midday sun. Asia was becoming a reality.

Under closer inspection a little of the charm of Edirne evaporated; there was too much dirt and poverty, too many ragamuffin children begging for cigarettes and money, too many recklessly driven American cars. After the hail of rocks that formed our reception into the town, we rode along warily, anxious to avoid a repeat performance. Our only outlay was on two glasses of water from a wandering vendor carrying a brass jug and tumblers. The water was clear and cold in our parched throats. The vendor, much to our surprise, would at first take nothing for his service. I tried to insist, but he
would not accept. His only explanation was to point to the Union Jack on
the Prima and pat us both on the shoulder. He was the first of the many
really Anglophile people we met all the way through Turkey. I still wanted
to pay for the water (he was pretty sharp with all his other customers) and
we finally reached a solution by getting him to accept a cigarette. He and I
stood puffing and nodding to each other, while Nita searched around
among the gear for our dark glasses, for the sun was very bright. We got
rid of a handful of kurus in exchange for a gallon of petrol at a modern
petrol station just outside the town limit and, with much enthusiasm for the
good tarmac road, opened the throttle full bore for the coast of the Sea of
Marmara.

We could not accomplish the journey in one day, so we spent the night at
the roadside. I chose a very convenient camping spot; a nicely levelled cut-
out in a grassy bank. We woke to find a coach at the side of the tent and a
bus queue standing diagonally across the guy ropes. I hastily drew the tent
flaps together and we dressed inside. With a number of 'god mornings' and
'excuse me's' we broke camp under the interested though politely restrained
glances of the many passengers. One man insisted on talking to us for a
long time, and only after noticing the many impatient and exaggerated
looks at wrist-watches on the part of the bus load did we realize that he was
the driver of the coach. He did not hurry, however, and finished his piece
before ambling slowly into the driving cab and starting up. The
antagonistic frowns vanished from the passengers' faces and were replaced
with smiles. One or two even waved as the coach moved off, which,
considering the hour and their prospects of a hard day's work, we valued
highly.

On the beach thirty miles from Istanbul we enjoyed, for the first time in
our lives, the pleasure of bathing naked from a mile-long beach of golden
sand which we had completely to ourselves. Splashing into the warm,
deep-blue breakers was absolutely marvellous, especially as it washed
away the dust of the road that clogged the pores of our skin and turned our
hair into matted tufts.

Nita and I had intended to have a brief dip and then push on, but the water
was too fascinating. We made an afternoon of it. It was as well we did, for
our next dip was to be in Australia! We reached Istanbul in time to book in
at the cheapest and most derelict hotel in Turkey, the only one with any
vacancies. How much nicer it would have been to camp in the clean fresh
air of the countryside, but we had no choice, for we had to be on hand first thing the next morning to see the agent for our next batch of film.

The Golden Horn, Gateway to the Magical East, last link with Europe. City of minarets; tall, masculine, military-looking structures; provocatively veiled women; haunting eastern music with all the romance of Asia. That is what we had visualized. It seems that illusions are easily shattered.

I am probably wrong in damning this city of fables, but in my view Istanbul was a wonderful place to leave in a hurry. The sanitary arrangements were, to say the least, exceedingly primitive and our nostrils were constantly assailed with aromas sadly unlike incense and exotic eastern spices. Add to this the flirting with death of suicidal car drivers, the incredibly narrow, viciously cobbled streets overflowing with sweating humanity, and you have an idea of Istanbul in high summer. Our bank balance, however, restricted us from a more salubrious neighbourhood at a charge of around £10 per night. Nevertheless, our beds were clean and, despite the perpetual stream of eastern hoodlum-types parading up and down the corridor, we slept undisturbed. As instructed by the hotel manager, I kept the door locked securely and left my gun in a strategic position at the head of the bed. We awoke with the sun trying to stream through the dusty window.

Film farce, part three, commenced promptly at nine o'clock. We found the agent after an hour's search through frowzy crowded streets, up a rickety flight of stairs, in and out of narrow nooks and crannies and, finally, an office door revealed Mr Fezeke, who welcomed us effusively while continuing to annihilate a plateful of cream cakes. We declined his fly-blown offerings and got down to business. Had our new batch of film arrived? It had, but we were forbidden access to it; even worse, perhaps, it would not be possible to send our exposed material out of the country unscreened. It was hopeless from the start. Turkish security regulations are possibly the most rigid in the world. We could do nothing but withdraw ungraciously.

So we crossed the Golden Horn on the ferry boat to Scutari with fifteen hundred feet of film shot in the Balkans. Mr Fezeke had said we should probably be able to get through the customs, but officially, that is by air freight, the film could not be exported. Our picture-making was over for the present. All that precious new film, two thousand feet, languishing in
that dingy little office, was to be sent back, unused, to London. I am still maddened at the thought. It meant that through northern Turkey, Persia and Afghanistan we would have no film. Our next pick-up point was Lahore in Pakistan. It was useless brooding, we should have to forget the whole thing and concentrate on getting to Lahore, three thousand, five hundred miles distant. It was going to be a long hard haul.

The Asian side of Istanbul appealed to us far more than the European had done. It was cleaner, more spacious, and the cobbles were less like boulders. Our route lay through a residential area that was reminiscent of southern France. Some magnificent houses sprawled back from the road, with Rolls and Bentley cars parked outside most of them.

There were no real suburbs, and it was not long before we were on the open road again. Once out of the city we saw few women and those we did see were veiled. National headgear for the men seemed to be cloth caps, a result of the westernizing by Ataturk. This gave them the appearance of industrial workers. They were restrained, slightly aloof in manner; in fact, particularly with the cloth caps, very Anglo-Saxon.

At Izmet, we took on provisions for the long run to Ankara: petrol and oil, some tinned meat and, among other oddments, another water bottle. Every day the sun became just a little bit hotter. While at Izmet we decided to appease our appetites with one good Turkish meal before setting off. We chose a cafe tucked away in a narrow side street. The establishment was full of men all with their caps firmly on their heads and eating in phlegmatic silence. A small boy was busy flitting from table to table and yelling out orders to the cook in the adjoining kitchen. One of the customers got up to help himself from the cooking range and I thought this a good idea for us to adopt. There were some very succulent dishes simmering over the charcoal stove: stuffed tomatoes, luscious fat green peppers, filled to bursting with aromatic mince, stuffed marrows, vine and cabbage leaves, egg-plant, and heaps of rice. The cook, beaming, waited for me to choose a dish.

I took one of each; an unorthodox procedure by the look on his face, but we were very hungry. It is usual to select one stuffed item and pad it well with masses of dry bread, or rice. That may be sufficient when eating is a regular habit. I staggered from the kitchen with two plates heaped to overflowing with every sample of the cook's culinary art. I could feel the
eyes following me as I walked past to our table. The Turks seemed to prefer eating to drinking, and at every locanta or chophouse we rarely saw them with a liquid stronger than lemonade, of which they drink a great deal. Water is popular too and they are expert at detecting a good water from an indifferent or bad one; to their trained palates a glass of fine water is appreciated as a fine wine is by a connoisseur.

As appetites were sated, so tongues were loosened, and before the meal was over we were chatting to each other in a desultory fashion. One of the customers told me it was the first time he'd ever seen a woman in the locanta. Nita paused in her feeding to tell him it probably wouldn't be the last. She had fallen in love with Turkish cooking, as I had, and tightly budgeted as we were, there would have to be at least a few more interludes like this one. We paid our bill to the lad; with a small tip it came to just over three shillings for the whole meal. For the first time in days I had to slip my belt a notch.
Now we were in Asia. Our direction was at first to the north; almost to the Black Sea, through flattish green countryside where I blessed the tarmac road beneath the scooter. After a while the road turned east again and wound up into the mountains. We had five hundred miles to cover from Istanbul to Ankara. It was quite an abrupt climb and the hairpin bends twisted up among forests undisturbed by man. At a little place called Bolu, we shed our jackets; drill slacks, shirts, and sandals were more than enough. From Bolu to Ankara the road ran through two hundred miles of pine forest. It was a delightful stretch. Fifty miles from the capital, however, the green disappeared and was replaced by harsh, arid country. Desert. The engine purred, the miles mounted and the sun became progressively hotter. We passed more and more water buffalo and women in drab, black swathings, a depressing colour accentuated somehow by the dazzling sunlight. Ankara loomed up three days after we had left Istanbul, and swallowed up our two sunburnt and dust-coated figures. The air-filter on the scooter was so choked it could barely climb the steep hill to the British Embassy. We stopped to ask directions and were immediately the cause of a traffic blockage. The crowd were all anxious to help us find our way and when we did get clear we were sent off with a rousing cheer. All very heartening.

Most of Ankara is modern and the city lies in a dustbowl. Bare mountains encroach on every side of this Hittite land. Nero called Ancyra (now Ankara) 'Metropolis'. The emperor must have been a prophet, for only within modern times, thanks to Kemal Ataturk, has this come true. With the temperature up in the nineties, we pulled into the Embassy, tired, hot, filthy, but triumphant.

The security guard glanced up from his imported edition of the Evening News and looked at us coldly.
'Yes, sir?'
'I'd like to see the Consul if I may.'
'Sorry, sir, the Ambassador is away and the Consul and the First Secretary have gone with him-they'll be back after the week-end.'
'But surely there must be somebody here to deal with business,' I said.
'Well, there is one assistant, but he won't be back until two o'clock.'
'Very well,' I replied, 'we'll wait for him.' We paced the quiet hall for a few minutes.
'Do you think my wife and I could get a wash?' I asked.
'Yes, sir,' he answered from the depths of the newspaper.
'Down the corridor and second on the left.'
'Thank you; you are most considerate.' He looked up from the paper with a puzzled expression as we passed the desk.
Prospects brightened as our interlude in the toilets lengthened. We stayed an hour, at the end of which we emerged scrubbed and shining to see the hands of the clock pointing to two. The assistant (thank heaven, a human being) bounced through the doors punctually.
In the next half-hour our position altered considerably for the better. First, as the Ambassador and his entourage were out of town, we could camp on one of the (lower) lawns for a night or two. The scooter, which was badly in need of attention, could be operated upon in the garage, and the next day the assistant would see what could be done about shipping out our film. Confidence restored, we set up camp in the spacious gardens and surrounded by exotic blooms and a view of the city below from the tent flap, we were established for our short stay in Ankara.
That evening we visited the tomb of Kemal Ataturk, a huge square mausoleum perched on top of one of the hills, brilliantly floodlit and proudly pointed out by an old man we met as the last resting-place of the greatest man in Turkey's tumultuous history. When we told him we had travelled from Istanbul, he dismissed that city with a sniff. 'That hybrid ants' nest is not Turkish; this is the real Turkey,' and he waved his hand about him at the myriad twinkling lights. 'You sniff that bracing air,' he said, inhaling deeply. 'There's nothing like that in Stamboul. That's symbolic of our new country, fresh, invigorating, and healthy. Ataturk knew what he was doing when he chose Ankara as the new hub of Turkey. It is a thousand pities he's not alive today.'
We looked at the glittering tomb again, reflecting on the influence of westernization we had seen thus far; the abolition of the fez was, in itself, a revolutionary move. I fell to surmising what this undoubtedly great man—his notorious private life notwithstanding—might have achieved had he lived longer. He had been dead for eighteen years but his memory to the Turks was as fresh as yesterday. Even now, tolerant as they generally are of criticism, one has to be careful on the subject of Mustapha Kemal Pasha.
For two days I worked stripped to the waist in the furnace-like garage of the Embassy. The Prima was checked from stem to stern. I decarbonized the engine, swapped the back tyre with the spare, changed the gear-box oil, took up some slack in the steering, adjusted the clutch, and cleaned the air filter of an incredible amount of dust. A new sparking-plug was fitted for good measure. The mileage showed just over three and a half thousand miles, about a third of our total land mileage to Australia. While I was
working on the scooter, Nita was no less busy cleaning and repairing our clothing and equipment. Both my pairs of slacks were torn at the knees, the results of occasional tumbles to the ground.

At night, it was a minor thrill for us to sit on the balcony of the Embassy building and watch the lights of the capital twinkle on: millions of them, like fireflies against a backdrop of velvet. The dusk brought coolness and a soft breeze, and to sit drinking Turkish coffee and watching the lighting-up ritual was a sort of unwritten law for most of the staff. For two nights we joined in this soothing pastime.

As we expected, we had no luck with our film problem. There was a wild idea of including it in the diplomatic bag, but this was vetoed at the last minute as 'not being quite cricket'. We should have to carry it to Lahore.
Turkish Delight (Chapter 5, Kayseri, Turkey)

Ankara disappeared behind us at dusk on the third day, and it was on the same crisp moonlit night that we made-for us-a tragic mistake. After the second hour, the road forked left, the tarmac continuing along the fork and a dirt surface track winding ahead. We continued along the bitumen. With two brief stops, we covered a hundred miles in record time and felt very pleased with the effort.

'What price those sore backsides now?' I said to Nita as we unpacked for a few hours' sleep. 'A hundred miles almost non-stop and I feel as fresh as a daisy.'

'Me too,' answered my wife. 'But it will be better if we stop for a few hours otherwise we'll feel washed out in the morning.' So we crept into the tent, which we'd had some difficulty rigging because of soft, sandy earth, and, feeling contented, snuggled down to sleep.

'Kayseri in the morning,' Nita mumbled, and with happy sighs we slept.

We were up and on the way again before dawn; prospects could not have been brighter. It was one of those days that started perfectly. The dawn broke about an hour after we started and I had the satisfaction of turning off the headlight as the daylight strengthened-I always enjoy doing that. And what a glorious dawn. The shafts of vivid golden sunlight stabbed up into the sky like daggers above the rugged beige mountains and the sandy plateaux. Our scooter ran like silk and the speedometer never dropped below forty-five. The tarmac wound out before us.

The first bad omen to dispel our complacency was a black shape far ahead which resolved, on approach, into an overturned grape lorry. It was in an awful mess, there were crushed grapes all over the road mixed with shattered glass, blood and petrol. The truck was lying half in a ditch and the driver was stretched out on the bitumen. He was dead. His colleague, sitting in a daze beside the body, was in a badly shocked condition, deathly pale, but apparently unhurt. He told us the other truck which had been in convoy with them had gone on to Ankara for help. The driver had been alive when they left, but they had been afraid to move him without expert aid. It would probably have been useless anyway-he had impaled himself on the steering column. It was the tragically familiar story of the over-warm cab, early hours of the morning, and the driver nodding over the
wheel; then the mistake that could not be rectified. For Turkish long-distance drivers there were no such pills as 'Nodoze'. The driver's mate was quite fatalistic and assured us there was nothing we could do. We sat smoking with him for a few minutes and then pushed on.

Our own mistake, discovered a few miles later, was nothing by comparison, but we felt pretty bitter about it at the time nevertheless. Nita spotted it first by exclaiming, 'Isn't that a lake over there?' I stared in the direction of her pointing.

'Can't be,' I began, 'there's no lake anywhere near the road.' But sure enough, there it was; and no mirage either. A beautiful expanse of water, shimmering in the early morning sun-I couldn't believe my eyes. We had studied the map the previous evening and there was no lake within miles of the Kayseri road. As I brought the Prima to a stop, the horrible suspicion loomed.

Nita said, ominously, 'That wretched dirt fork just outside Ankara; it couldn't have been the Kayseri road...' But it was. There, on our map, was the lake, large as life and touching the road at several points. But it was the wrong blasted road. Instead of being a mere fifty miles from our objective, we were nearly two hundred and fifty. I pin-pointed our position; instead of moving south-east, we were heading due south. For us this was a major calamity. All that night driving, for which we were patting ourselves on the backs, had been wasted. I looked at the map again. There was a rough inverted triangle of road with Ankara and Kayseri at the upper points and a place called Nigde at the base. We were sixty miles or so from Nigde, so were what might be termed beyond the point of no return. It was the longest detour we had ever made.

But the day that had started with the sight of death was far from over. We ran out of road at about ten o'clock and for mile after endless mile we ploughed through inches thick of sand and dust under a blazing sun. The country, harsh and arid, looked very unfriendly. It looked even worse after we had the spill. It all happened-as these things usually do-in a twinkling. One minute we were going along upright and reasonably serene, the next the front wheel hit a soft sand-patch and we were lying sprawled over the track with the scooter on its side and the engine screaming wildly. The ground, which met us at forty miles an hour, was much harder than it looked, but we were fortunate not to be badly hurt. Hips, knees,
elbows severely bruised, but the real disaster was not to our bodies, or to the scooter, but to Nita's spectacles. They had been in the offside pannier-bag along with the dixie and other cooking equipment. The whole lot was battered out of recognition. Most of the stuff was replaceable, but not, of course, the specs.

One running board of the Prima was badly twisted. I remedied the trouble in part by bashing it level with a rock, but it still made a pretty uncomfortable footrest. There was, as I said, no mechanical damage. A great wave of depression flowed over us as we reviewed the shambles that had been a pannier-bag. This countryside was hostile for sure.

Nita started laughing at me. My debonair 'gorblimy' cap was no longer set at a jaunty angle as I sat chin in hand on that dry, shadeless bank of dust, but had slewed round with the impact and now reposed with the peak over one ear. We were both smothered with dust.

'Do I really look so funny?' I grunted sourly. 'You can't afford to laugh with the rest of the journey as a blurred picture.'

'If it's going to be like this most of the way,' and here my wife nodded at the dead, parched view, 'I'll be only too pleased to keep it slightly out of focus.'

I stared gloomily at the rocks and desert flats; there was no other human being in sight, not even an animal to relieve the barren landscape. If, by some magic, we could have been spirited home at that moment, I'd have gone like a shot.

But in such horrible situations, it is useless to sit brooding. We rallied ourselves as best we could, bolstering each other's lowered morale. Somehow we reached Kayseri, although it took another day and a half. It was lucky the accident had not been a really serious one: there was nothing between Ankara and Kayseri in the way of medical aid.
At a village half-way between Kayseri and Sivas, we went in search of petrol. From past experience, we knew we had to employ sleuth-like methods. A direct approach usually led nowhere. Suddenly no one spoke English. The first step was to stop at one of the little chai houses where the samovar was for ever ready, and get two glasses of the milkless sweet tea. Ironically, we never bought one glass ourselves all the time we were in Turkey; someone was always ready, indeed anxious, to act as host. It was probably a point of etiquette, but we liked to think it was because they found us good company. Once the tea glasses were in our hands then the business of locating fuel could, in a roundabout way, begin. First, from somewhere in the village, an interpreter, usually elderly, would come on the scene. The questions and answers would soon be flowing freely. After an hour or so of conversation, we might casually mention petrol.

'Oh, yes,' we would be told, 'there is a man in the village who keeps some in a forty-gallon drum; he's a butcher really, but quite likely you'd get some there.'

‘And oil too?’

'Yes, of course, and oil too; in fact, so-and-so would go with you to do the introducing.' So eventually we would manage to refuel. As time, within reason, was one of our more expendable items, this way of buying petrol and oil was pleasant, instructive and, ultimately, quite successful.

The Turk is a fine sort of man, tough, down to earth, with no illusions about himself or his country. He is very easy to talk to. It was nice to be able to say, 'Your roads are really bloody awful,' and know he would not take offence. On the contrary, he would heartily endorse such sentiment, but with a mischievous grin would retort, ‘Yes, they are terrible, but our donkeys and oxen don't seem to mind them.' Sometimes I would gladly have swapped our skittish machine for a couple of slow but sure-footed donkeys.

On our way through Turkey we must have sat in discussion dozens of times at the chai houses, the Turkish version of the local pub. Always, at some point, the question of Cyprus would crop up. Why, they said, were we messing about so ineffectually on that strategic island, like a lot of old hens? They felt very strongly about this enigma and every group with
which we spoke put forward the same solution. Let the Turkish army take
over and within one week there would be no more trouble. To them it was
simply black and white. But, we retorted, those tactics are not in vogue any
more; that method is as outdated as the Turkish harem. It might be
outdated but still highly effective, they said; what had happened to Britain?
In the old days no country dared incur her displeasure, yet now she
practised appeasement.

We heard this frank opinion of Britain many times, either directly or
through an interpreter. We have a staunch ally in these rugged, taciturn
descendants of a Moslem empire, but they think we have turned soft. They
themselves live on memories of the ruthless but highly successful Ataturk-
Father of the Turks. He was the man, they said, who had lifted Turkey out
of the rut of Moslem fatalistic resignation; but for him, Turkey today
would be nothing more than a satellite of some other power.
Westernization provided an answer for them. Now one of the most
powerful countries they took as a model seemed to be paling into
insignificance. Why? It was difficult to answer that one.

The infrequent villages, their mud-and-plaster walls fading into their
surroundings as if camouflaged, merged with the view of ridge after ridge
of hills and spurs of the lofty ranges. Someone had told us that only about
twenty per cent of Turkey was cultivated. In this northern province there
was nothing but endless desolation.

We reached Erzurum, high up in the north-eastern corner of Turkey, chief
city of the province bordering on the Russian frontier. Not surprisingly it is
here that one of the largest military camps is established. The Turks are not
afraid of the Russians—at least not physically—for they are brave and
tenacious soldiers; but ever since the Czar dubbed them the 'Poor Man of
Europe' the Turks have been ready at least to demonstrate that the poor
man is not necessarily a weak one. The constant maintenance of a large,
fully mobile army is as much a strain on their resources as it is on ours.
While half the young men of the country train in their tactical exercises in
the barren country around Erzurum, the other half, still in the army,
languish on the Bulgarian border. They have not forgotten the mass
expulsion, with all its implications, of Bulgarian-settled Turks during the
Korean War. Many of the people we spoke to said it was a miracle that the
two nations didn't end up fighting. But bigger powers were at work behind
the scenes; no war would ever again remain within the confines of the
Balkans. Be that as may, it is a drain, a serious drain on their struggles to remain solvent. Lack of roads, technicians, communications, and modern farming methods, are all too obvious. There has been progress, a great deal in the cities, but more of the modern world needs to reach the smallholdings. We saw men using wooden ploughs in many districts; picturesque, but futile.
Persia (Chapter 6, Tabriz, Persia)

Our view of Tabriz was clouded by the trouble we had in getting there. The road from the border held all the ingredients of purgatory: dust, heat, corrugations, and some of the longest miles we had ever travelled. At least it was not monotonous and neither of us could complain of feeling 'liverish' since leaving Europe. Already the luxury of metalled roads was just a dream. Water began to be a problem and we gave up indiscriminate drinking, particularly during the middle day.

At the point where aching muscles and burning thighs cried 'Stop', a cluster of twinkling lights on the horizon of darkness spurred us on to a last grand effort. Distances in the Persian night we found hard to judge and our estimated half-hour to the comfort of civilization turned out to be one and a half hours before Tabriz engulfed us with friendly bustling crowds and busy streets.

Immediate needs were food and somewhere to sleep. We found both in a modest hotel, a balconied wooden building huddled cosily around a delightful and typically Persian garden. In the centre, a lily pool was floodlit with coloured lights strung from the cypress trees. On crazy paving, dining-tables were laid out among the flowerbeds. The night was warm, pungent with the heavy aroma of exotic blooms and filled with the whine of hungry mosquitoes.

Although it was ten o'clock, a swarthy, solicitous proprietor ministered to all our wants and, after installing the scooter safely in a garage and putting our gear into a balcony room overlooking the pond, we took our places, quite alone, at one of the garden tables, to be served in due course with one of Persia's favourite repasts-shishlik. Tender cuts of mutton roasted over charcoal and skewered on sticks were surrounded by gigantic side dishes, with the most comprehensive salad one could wish for. There was enough food to satisfy six normal adults. However, we were not normal, we were not in a hurry, we had eaten very little in the past two days, and it would be some time before another feast like this would be placed before us. We ate the lot.

Physical exhaustion is not an unpleasant state, provided the stomach is full and there is a comfortable bed near at hand. We reached the stage where we could not take another lettuce leaf, or another sip of the clear, ice-cold water, when to utter a sentence of more than two words was an effort. Nine
days of scootering over ruts was more than enough to make us ready for blessed oblivion. I think we would have got it, too, had the bedrooms been provided with mosquito-nets. The Persian variety of mosquito is highly pestiferous, with a vicious whine that cannot be ignored, for it heralds a needle-jab somewhere on the anatomy. There were a great many squadrons active that night and we arose at nine o'clock the next morning, hollow-eyed as ever and well peppered with burning itches. These were not malarial, just painful. The gargantuan meal, the comfortable beds, and the bites cost us about thirty shillings.

The next morning I got busy on the wearying business of changing money again; this time, liras into rials. While I was in the midst of negotiations, a dark little man wearing a fez attached himself to me and despite my repeated assurances that no guide was needed-or indeed wanted-he insisted on accompanying me in and out of the bank and on a tour of the shopping area in search of yet another water bottle. My companion tried to sell me a taxi ride, periodically pointing to the garishly painted, lunatic-driven cars, for twenty rials to anywhere in the city. Ten rials, I learned later, would be ample.

Tabriz was hot, interesting, and a blend of ancient and ultramodern. The shops and bazaars were well stocked with internationally familiar goods, and street vendors, carrying overflowing trays of cheap Japanese brie-a-brae, were everywhere. One cinema exhorted the inhabitants, with lurid posters written in English, to see Hollywood's latest spectacle, 'Big Men in Small Planes'; there was no queue.

I still had my faithful follower who gave up trying to sell taxis and began tempting me with hand-made carpets, the cheapest and finest in all Persia. If I would just accompany him to the house of a friend, I would be 'left gasping' at the beauty of his work. No carpets, I said. We walked on together in silence. From nearly every shop and emporium a wireless blared the dreadful wail that is so unacceptable to western ears. Urchins darted between and around us with trays of sweets and cigarettes; at one time there were five bright-eyed little faces under outsize turbans, begging me to try their wares. My self-appointed guide was cursing them and lauding his friend's carpets in the same breath. I gave up looking for a water bottle. We got nearer to the hotel and my companion hastily switched from carpets to silverwork-the most fabulous filigree on earth, he assured me. He flatly refused to accept my indifference to his offers, and
would not believe that a visiting infidel could be in Tabriz and remain uninterested in its fine craftsmanship. If Nita and I had owned a van instead of a scooter, with money to spare, we would have loaded the thing down with Tabriz workmanship, for what I did see was excellent. But we had to stick to essentials. I reached the hotel without spending and the little middle-man, puzzled and bewildered, slipped away into the crowds.
Persia (Chapter 6, Teheran, Persia)
As always we were extremely interested in the state of the road ahead of us, this time to Teheran. Ideas on conditions varied, from good to impossible, according to the whim of the speaker and whether he wanted to put our minds at rest or alarm us. As always, too, we knew our asking was really pointless. It had to be tackled in order to find the answer, but enquiring was hard to resist. In general the road was worse than we had expected. With a good tarmac road under our wheels we could have reached Teheran in three days with ease, as it was we were on the track for nine. I believe that for most of the six hundred kilometres (which doesn't sound much, said quickly) I was in second gear. The ribbon, alternately mountainous and flat, was deeply corrugated from one city to the other.

We passed through a number of small towns where the road deteriorated rather than improved: Mianeh, Nikpei, Nimavar. On the seventh day-more dead than alive-we reached Kazvin, about fifty miles from the shores of the Caspian. Had the road been metalled we would have shot across the intervening gap and spent a few hours soaking our tired bodies in the sea. As it was, we spent the night in a deserted caravanserai just outside the town. It was normal for us, even with a late night, to waken as soon as the sun rose, but within the four mud walls of the once bustling night stop of camel-trains, we slept, with only insects and a stray dog for company, until two in the afternoon. When, still drooping and aching in every joint, we remounted for the last stretch, it was as though we had stopped for only a few minutes. On arriving in the capital, utterly fatigued, we made our way through the streaming crowds, gasping in a temperature of over a hundred degrees, past numerous Pepsi-Cola signs to the haven of the British Embassy.

So tanned were we from the days of burning sun and wind, that the Security Guard could not at first believe that we were English: finally convinced, his first question was, 'Have you heard the latest test score?'

'No,' I replied tartly, 'we have not; but we did hear that the Embassy might give us washing facilities and advise us on a reasonable hotel.' We were shown to a wash-room and later ushered into the presence of one of the secretaries, who only seemed able to recommend the most luxurious hotel. We received no constructive suggestions, no friendliness, merely a few officious platitudes. Finally, we found rooms on the top floor of a crowded hotel which gave us a wonderful view of the street below and of
people in the tenements opposite.

One falls easily into the life of Teheran. Shaded streets, mosques, fountains, and the smell of the East blend with a city that is civilized, permanent, and familiar. Furious little taxi-cabs, many of them English cars, dart skilfully in and out among the pedestrians. Here one can buy French daily newspapers, see some excellent modern architecture vying with bazaars of ancient Persia, buy absolutely all or any of the latest commodities of modern living in the wide shopping centres (including Pepsi-Cola), dine in a first-class air-conditioned restaurant, or eat syrupy-sweet cakes and drink the yellow wines. One cannot be bored in Teheran.

It was obvious, on that first evening, that the last savage stretch of dust and desert had not left our little expedition unscathed. Nita complained of a dizzy headache and a terrible heaviness in her legs. I dosed her with aspirin and put her to bed early. For a few days we would forget all about the track. The grace, the gaiety of Teheran, on that first day ended with Nita running a high temperature. It was stifling in those upper rooms too, and, tired as we were, it was one o'clock before I finally switched off the light. The hot night air came through the open windows in waves of oven-heat. The sheet beneath me was soaking wet. The heat of the desert is preferable to the gasping furnace of the city.

The next morning Nita was feeling worse. I told her to try and sleep while I went in search of a doctor. The British Embassy were coldly helpful and suggested I try the resident doctor who might be able to 'administer'. They were a bit scornful of the symptoms, putting it down with certainty to 'Teheran Tummy', which every newcomer has to suffer, the water being piped by the open drainage system, with no sewerage. I wasn't too sure; when we were in West Africa they had told me my malady was 'Kano Tummy'; and it turned out to be a severe dose of dysentery. I got the doctor to my wife with all haste. He confirmed the general opinion: it was indeed that sapping, but fortunately transient, 'T.T.'; he warned us about drinking the water and prescribed a diet of mast (yoghourt) for the next three days. Nita smiled wanly at this-yoghourt was one of her pet aversions. But for three days it was all she ate, and it effected a rapid cure.

We celebrated her first day out of bed by buying another pair of jeans to replace the torn and sun-faded pair she had been wearing since leaving home. In three days she had lost exactly a stone in weight, and the little
Jewish tailor had trouble finding a pair small enough to fit. We spent the
cooler hours of the morning walking around the huge underground bazaar
and while we were haggling over a square of silk, three young men
introduced themselves and helped us to acquire the scarf at a reasonable
price. One of them, a strong-faced, athletic-looking fellow, turned out to be
the long-jump champion of Persia, Nasser Najen. We chatted with the
champion and the other two, who were his brothers, for quite some time,
finishing up lunching with them and receiving an invitation to visit the city
stadium that evening to watch the jumping practice.

Most nations take their sport seriously, but the Persians take theirs more
seriously than most. There was a practice football match in progress when
we arrived and I have rarely seen a more exciting display of skill and
enthusiasm. The pace-in spite of the heat-was fast and unabating. Most of
the moves were cunning and full of inventive sparkle. It was a great
pleasure to watch. The Teheran stadium has everything a sportsman could
wish for. In addition to the main arena, there were all sorts of smaller
grounds, open-air swimming-pools, tennis courts, cycle-tracks, and games
squares. We watched Nasser Najen limbering up, then finally discarding
his track-suit to give a display of co-ordinated beauty of motion that was
undoubtedly in world-championship class.

We talked for many hours to this fine athlete, and his views on his country
were well formed and critical. He told us that everyone was aware of
decay, both religious and social, but apathetic about doing something to
arrest it. The greatest need was for education-to teach, among other things,
integrity. There was too much corruption, too much graft. And the contrast
between primitive villages and industrial towns and cities would have to be
softened. At the moment they were utterly foreign to each other. We had to
agree; our road had led us through country where the sight of a lorry
passing in a cloud of dust was a shock, a sight that for a moment was
unacceptable to our minds already steeped in the aura of a long-dead
empire. Teheran itself had been a revelation of contrast, particularly
emphasized by our slow approach. Like Turkey, Persia's need is primarily
for sound communications, veins of life-blood to the remote wilderness
dwellers. Only then can any concrete plan for a new life be embarked
upon. Another eminent Persian told us that too many people were prone to
live by the principles of the Persian poets, that life was to be enjoyed
sensually. He felt that the spirit of the Rubaiyat was leading modern Persia
into the ancient dust of Persepolis.
One more visit to the Embassy produced the information that our next stop, Meshed, was in the middle of a holy month, and that Nita would have to be careful to keep her hair and wrists covered in that town. The First Secretary told me that the people were fanatical in their sacred city, especially at the time of rejoicing. We also learnt, on our last day in the capital, that we could have camped on the lawn of the Embassy and had the use of an excellent swimming-pool in the grounds. It was nice to know what we could have done if someone had given us permission three days earlier.
Persia (Chapter 6, Teheran to Meshed, Persia)
Our toughening-up course, over the harsh mountains and deserts of Turkey and Persia, stood us in good stead for the next lap: one of the most difficult—even dangerous—of the whole journey. From Teheran to Meshed was roughly nine hundred kilometres, all of the distance over rugged hewn tracks. I did everything possible in Teheran to make certain that the scooter was completely road worthy—or rather trackworthy—for the gruelling test. If we were able to complete the stretch without mishap, most of our worries would be not exactly over, but at least subdued.

We were very quiet on the evening of our departure, occupied with unhappy thoughts of waterless infinity and the very real possibility that the machine might fail at a critical time. It's always worse to anticipate, for as soon as we started our fears would vanish, but we were both afraid of the immensity of barren distance that separated us from the next city. There was a town halfway—Shahrud—and a few scattered villages along the track, but these were really no more than oases, where we could pause briefly before continuing. I could not consider actually resting until those nine hundred sizzling kilometres were behind us.

So, hopefully, we bade our Persian friends and their fascinating capital a shaky farewell and, in the cool evening, continued our Odyssey.

There was nothing in the least pleasant about the next brief chapter in our lives. Days on end, and nights, with no variation in a sound that constantly smote our ears, the high-pitched, blessedly steady, hum of the engine, conquering an endless scorched distance yard by yard. Our vision was concentrated upon the tantalizing brown ribbon ahead. Whirls of dust rose from it, there were unaccountable swift scurries of sand; sometimes rocks emerged; the desolation on either side was that of a dead planet. No villages, except on rare days, no other road, not even the ruins of dwellings or a sign of man or beast; and no horizon to gaze towards eagerly, for the desert swung up to meet the amber sky.

The power and the immensity of the desert struck us almost tangibly, with only our one piston—no bigger than a cup—keeping Nita and me from its savage grasp. There was more vaporization trouble. I was not concerned with appearances; without a thought I tossed away the two side panels which so smartly shielded the works. Now the engine was totally exposed, but cooling at once became more efficient. I say 'cooling' reservedly: there
was nothing cool on the road to Meshed, not even the nights.

We lay awake, at the side of the desolate track, looking at the low-hanging stars. It was cool up there, in that great velvet silence, but on the tortured earth it was still hot, even at two in the morning. I like deserts, the wilderness, the savage majesty, the humbling silence. I like the heat too, provided there is some escape from the driving sand-laden blasts of hot air that fill the eyes, the nostrils, and the very pores of the skin.

One morning we awoke to see a huge square chunk of rock thrusting skywards in the far distance. At six o'clock, after brewing up, eating a tin of bully beef and some biscuits, we started off towards the landmark. It was still on the skyline at noon and we reached it just before dark. Our mileage for that day was exactly fifty miles of atrocious track, covered mostly in second gear. We saw no other human being—not even a beast—the whole day. We spoke rarely, awed by the dead world and by our own delicate position. Two small tyres, punished relentlessly, kept us just clear of the almost actively hostile land.

The deserts and the seas remain as man's last enemies. They are fearsome in their size. Nothing could be more dissolving than the sea; nothing drier than the dehydrating dryness of the desert. All Persians are aware of this, for the desert covers their land. Nearly everywhere it encroaches on towns and villages alike, smothers cities and reduces them back to dust. That is why these people are so water conscious, with their gardens of tinkling miniature waterfalls and ornate lily-ponds. The smallest bit of shade or moisture may be enough to save a man's physical condition and his sanity.

The brief stops that we made in the ancient communities along the road were blessed interludes. Hospitality was overflowing from the almost destitute inhabitants. They knew what had been endured to reach their homes; they marvelled at the Prima and its capabilities, and were demonstrative towards us—sunburnt as themselves—who had tackled the desert almost as they did.

Miraculously, the scooter continued to run across the arid surface, burning all sorts of weird concoctions loosely labelled petrol and oil. We had a lot of spills, of course, but were very hardened and took them almost in our stride. There was not an ounce of superfluous flesh on either of us by then and we had become adept at rolling expertly when the front wheel hit a soft
patch sending the machine into an uncontrollable side-slip. Water, the big problem, we hoarded like a couple of misers, drinking only in the early morning and at night. We gave up washing ourselves or any of our equipment or clothing. The stubble on my chin gradually lengthened into a beard. Nita's biggest worry was her hair. No matter how she swathed her head in scarves, the sand drifted through the coverings and turned the glossy black into matt white. Our emotions were dormant during those days of battle with the desert. We were neither happy nor disgruntled, but certainly too exhausted to argue or converse much about anything. We just rode. Distances we thought of in terms of time rather than miles. Another day nearer, another hour behind us. We ate very little, drank water twice a day and I smoked a great deal. The unattainable, intangible Meshed gradually became a goal of substance. We, like Persian nomads, began to live for the day when riding over the desert we would see for the first time the green of the big oasis.

Meshed, the Holy City, leapt up out of the yellow desert, a bustling Oriental metropolis situated, for no apparent reason, in the middle of nowhere. A great glittering golden dome of a mosque dominated the rest of the city. This was the old Persia, still very much in existence; there was no Pepsi-Cola here.
Persia (Chapter 6, Meshed, Persia)
The market-place was swarming with throngs of different nationalities, and Moslems from Egypt, Afghanistan, and Arabia rubbed shoulders with the Persian residents over the riotously coloured silks, skins, leather-work, and spider-web silver. The noise, the smells, the jabber of multi-lingual tongues were unabating despite the tremendous heat: the Holy Month in the Sacred City was in full swing. It is here that part of Mohammed's body is said to rest. The city was, we felt, little different for the passing of the odd thousand years.

Such were the activity and excitement that we puttered into the heart of this cosmopolitan oasis almost unnoticed, which really made a pleasant change. We could dismount and stretch luxuriously without being hemmed in on all sides, and take a good look at the bustle around us in the dusty, sun-baked streets.

Meshed absorbed us into its life. I remembered the warning of the British Embassy in Teheran. Nita was wearing a sleeveless blouse and slacks, wrists and arms uncovered, her face and hair exposed; she had pulled the scarf from her head and was shaking some of the sand from her locks. I didn't see so much as one fanatical glance. Several smiling faces, looks of passing interest at our strange transport, that was all. I wondered how long it was since the Embassy secretary had visited this lovely city. It had a throbbing vitality, excitement, and jubilance that were certainly peculiar to the Orient. But here was no sign of fanaticism. Everyone seemed too happy to be concerned with such fervour. My apprehension regarding infidels being put to the knife, or being disposed of by any other unpleasant method, in this Moslem stronghold, faded and died.

Accommodation was at a premium, naturally, and having tried a couple of hotels without success, Nita and I were idly speculating whether to drive out to the desert and camp, when we were accosted by a most villainous-looking individual. He had an aggressive black beard, preposterously hooked nose, and piercing black eyes, while a dagger hilt protruded from his voluminous robes. He stared at us in silence for an interminable time and I began to shift uneasily, for he had all the attributes of a first-rate fanatic. He tore his glance, with apparent reluctance, away from our faces and his eyes travelled over our battered machine.

'German, isn't it?' he said, conversationally, in almost perfect English.
‘Er, yes, of course; German,' I replied, taken aback at this chatty remark in my mother tongue. He hawked ferociously and spat with great force into the dust. There was no inference in this; he did it every few minutes with disconcerting regularity.

'I'm a truck driver,' said our brigand amiably. 'I know Pakistan, Persian Gulf, Iran—you know, oil companies—all over.' He waved his hand in an expansive gesture.

'You have your own truck?' I asked, fascinated by the luxurious turban he was wearing.

'No, but my brother owns two-Internationals. Very good trucks, better than English, well, perhaps not better, but we can get good delivery, and spare parts too we can get. If one of yours breaks down it is finish.' Incongruous though the conversation was—Arabian Nights characters with upturned slippers and jewelled daggers just don't talk about trucking and spare parts—the shaft got home. Why should these countries, admitting that so far as quality went, Britain was still best, buy American and German products in preference to our own? We ourselves were mounted on a German machine, simply because the British manufacturers did not make such a vehicle—and this, five years after Britain had been flooded with Continental scooters and the general public had accepted them as a permanent institution! I changed the subject hastily; even the infidel could become fanatical over some subjects.

'My wife and I are very impressed with this beautiful city,' I said. 'Is it always so crowded and lively?'

'No, but it is a very important centre for us Moslems and there are usually some visitors who come to worship. You are staying for a few days to have a look?'

I said we should certainly like to but, with the hotels full, this did not seem very likely.

'Then you could stop where I do. It is full, but there would be ways to admit you.' He hawked again, and I began to fear for the hotel proprietor's life, until I remembered this was merely a form of verbal full stop.
'Done,' said I.

'Good, then you follow me and go slowly, it is only a few minutes away, but rather hard to find if you do not know the city well.' We threaded our way through the million-or so it seemed -stalls and bustle of the holiday-mood crowds, never letting the sight of the flowing grey-flecked robes of our guide disappear entirely. Endless turnings; contrasts of sun and shadow; streets narrowing progressively; till finally our guide stopped before a little door set in a high, whitewashed wall. He drummed heavily with his beringed knuckles and we waited expectantly in the brilliant sunshine, smiling affably to fill in the pause. Eventually the door creaked open to reveal a heavily veiled woman who gave us only a brief glance before opening the door wide and motioning us through.

I don't know quite what Nita and I expected to see on the inside of the walls; certainly the exterior did not look too prepossessing. However, we were almost staggered at the contrast of scene. Here were no poky little overcrowded rooms, airless and cramped. Nita gave a little gasp of surprise at the interior of the hotel. Before us was a large square compound, paved with cool terrazzo and studded with palms which surrounded a pool of crystal water rippling under a fountain. Around the pool, languishing on rugs, were three very beautiful women and a couple of young men. On every side of the compound, balconies led into cool bedrooms.

The three women hastily replaced their veils as we entered, but that was the only concession they made to the appearance of the two unbelievers. Nita and I were shown into a lovely room, cool and dim, windowless and furnished only with an abundance of hand-made, ornate carpets and rugs which decorated the walls and floor. We laid out our sleeping-bags and other belongings in this cosy lair elated at this lucky conclusion to our past days of hardship. We began our own belated siesta ten minutes after arrival.

Our friend, Mahmud, had an inspiration the next morning; we must see the Mosque of Meshed. We fell in promptly with this suggestion and riding in a broken-down droshky, driven by a drowsy old man, arrived some time later in the centre of the city with its smell of leather, pepper, human sweat, and the acrid fumes thrown out by the open fires. Everywhere, blinded and
scarred donkeys kept the air jangling with their neck bells, and the veiled women, virtually beasts of burden, carried huge loads on their heads and gossiped in shrill, high-pitched voices.

The mosque stood aloof from the main stream of humanity, a huge golden-domed temple, secure behind high walls. We had an outsider's view through giant gateways of the imposing edifice, all porcelain blue and glittering gold, but that was our only glimpse for we were not allowed inside. Mahmud was crestfallen but not dismayed. Instead we drove around the city at a leisurely pace and away from the market there were some cool avenues, tree-lined and still wet from spraying. We went from this serene atmosphere to the hubbub of the Street of Silversmiths. There I really bemoaned our tight budget: superb, solid silver cigarette cases, snuffboxes, delicate filigree jewellery, all quite cheap and very desirable—but we could only look.

Our Arabian Nights hotel kept us well fed. Too well, really, with copious piles of rice and cuts of goat meat which we ate with the other guests, digging into the communal bowls with our fingers. For our three-day stop we never used a chair, a table, or cutlery. The first day was strange and we found it difficult to adapt ourselves, but by the third morning we began to wonder if perhaps our own society was bogged down with too many accoutrements.

By the time we were ready to leave Meshed, Nita and I were entering the second phase in the mental metamorphosis that comes with travel. The first phase, which had remained with us through the Balkans, Turkey, and most of Iran, had consisted of a somewhat superior attitude to the countries through which we were passing. This was an intangible, almost unconscious feeling, which neither mentioned to the other. But it was there nevertheless. We were British-people from one of the 'dynamo' countries of the world—and even in 1956, this influence radiated a long way from our little island. It carried us on the crest of its wave nearly into Afghanistan—that nasty little amused, indulgent air, which I found hard at times to suppress. But then, in the sacred city of Meshed, the second cycle began.

'The Mosque is beautiful and the sun is warm,' they said. 'But what are these things beside your modern, organized world?' What indeed? We in Britain had all the advantages. Now, almost overnight, 'all the advantages' seemed to lose their value. Now, when an enthusiastic visionary, with
sparkling eyes, told us how one day Teheran would be the first city in all
the Middle East and all the towns and villages would be modernized—the
veil swept away, emancipation of women, health schemes, television, with
all the throb and urgency of an imported New World—I recoiled in horror.
Silently and perhaps selfishly, I hoped that day would be a long way off.
So much for changes of attitude; we had fallen under the spell of the East.
We were now sufficiently mellowed to appreciate Afghanistan.
The Forbidden Land (Chapter 7, Afghanistan)

Pumice mountains, somnolent and brooding, almost animate in their opposition to our progress, surrounded us on every side. They were a perfect heat trap which engulfed us on the last miles of Persia and over the border into Afghanistan. Two days on the track and we were already thinking longingly of the piles of rice left untouched in the hospitable haven of Meshed. For two days now we had eaten nothing but watermelon; refreshing, cool, but far from satisfying as a food.

Our hunger, however, was but a secondary consideration. There we were, two very small figures with an equally diminutive machine, on the threshold of one of the most wild, remote regions on earth. The prospect was frightening, yet fascinating.

The very first Afghan to whom we spoke emphasized that this stretch of our journey would not only be a battle with nature. Tall, heavily bearded and squinting at us with eyes tightly narrowed against the glare of sun and sand, he dropped his official tone once all the passport and paper-work was completed. He spoke passable English.

'You must be careful between towns,' he said, fixing us with a steady eye. 'We have some trouble with criminals.'

'What sort of trouble?' I asked, more casually than I felt.

'Oh, trucks being ambushed, drivers murdered; but usually it is only when the freight is worth pillaging.'

To Nita and me that was cold comfort. He added for good measure, 'It always comes in spurts. We might go three or four months with no trouble, then suddenly there are a whole series of incidents; like this month when we have had three hold-ups already. You will probably be all right, they would have little use for what you are carrying, except perhaps your rifle.'

I glanced at my gun sticking out conspicuously, temptingly, from the baggage. I laughed, somewhat nervously, uncertain whether to break the weapon down and hide it, or keep it out of the case, loaded and ready for instant action.

'Well,' I said, with a hollow cheerfulness, 'let's hope that St Christopher
will keep along with us to Kabul.'

'St Christopher?' queried our brigand-like customs official. 'There are three of you?'

'No, two--and I hope we stay that way.'

'Oh, I see, a figure of speech, ha, ha,' he laughed, secure in his mud fortress, surrounded by friends and ammunition. 'Well, have a good journey.'

The shimmering, parched landscape, utterly still, completely silent, swallowed us at once. In five minutes we were in barren desolation. The ribbon of rough track before us looked hostile and formidable. I began to wish we had gone by some other route. The frontier village, Islam Killah—which Nita thought a most unfriendly name-fell behind us and with it the last security of people and the comparative safety of Persia. We began our midget assault on the wild mountains.

The track—if one could call it by so flattering a name—to Herat tried both ourselves and the machine to the absolute maximum. It was a nightmare. We were incessantly bogged down in thick sand, and hurled violently from the scooter innumerable times by the barely definable track when it suddenly splintered into deep fissures caused through erosion and savage floods.

By all the laws of nature, the scooter should have disintegrated at least a dozen times on the way to Herat. We were burnt black by the sun during the day and lay huddled and shivering in our sleeping-bags during the night, almost frozen by the rarefied, high-altitude atmosphere. For hours on end we picked our way along river-beds, riding between boulders and constantly paddling with our feet to stay upright; average speed, ten miles an hour. Into Rahzanak, an impoverished village, we fell exhausted and hungry to the point of starvation.

Since the ample feeding of Meshed five days previously, we had eaten nothing but melon and grapes. Lean, hawk-faced tribesmen, all armed to the teeth, strode about or squatted in groups under the shade of dusty, scarred trees, noisily sucking tea or puffing communal hubble-bubble pipes. There were no women to be seen. I managed to cadge a bowl of rice
and a miserable scraggy chicken and we fell wolfishly on to this poor fare. It took an hour to eat; with our digestion in a normal condition, we could have finished it in ten minutes. It was fortunate that I had enough petrol to get us to the town of Herat, for there was none in the village.

We pushed on well before dark and camped about twenty miles farther on in a wadi. We would dearly have loved to continue through the night. The warning of the frontier guard and the appearance of the Afghans in the village of Rahzanak kept the warning of bandits fresh in our minds. But night driving was impossible. As it was there was really no track, just odd signs and tyre ruts pointing the general direction of the route. Almost impossible to trace at times during the day, it would have been fatal to try after dark. Once lost, one could die of thirst, or go mad in the heat of the ensuing days, or fall foul perhaps of some wandering band of hillmen. No, tempting though it was—for in such a predicament movement soothes the nerves and shortens the period of potential danger—we just had to wait impatiently for the dawn.

On the third morning, all the tension flooded from us as the city of Herat suddenly appeared on the horizon. I now had some idea of how American frontiersmen must have felt as the safety of the stockade loomed ahead.
The Forbidden Land (Chapter 7, Herat to Shind-Dan, Afghanistan)

(After arriving in Herat) Our first need was money, and changing a traveller's cheque proved to be a bit troublesome. The bank, a long, low white building with an armed warrior standing guard at the door, offered us advice never heard in England.

'Don't change your money here, you'll get a far better exchange in the market.'

This proved an excellent tip. The banks in Afghanistan are poor establishments and the manager told me that no one entrusted his money to other people, preferring to bury it somewhere safely.

So, armed with a fistful of the currency-afghani—we pottered off along the dusty streets to look for accommodation. The scene was much the same as usual: parched, undernourished trees; thin, overworked horses dragging tinkling tongas; the ubiquitous turbaned crowd. There was an hotel, but it was difficult to find. We drank much tea at innumerable chai houses before we gained accurate directions and eventual access to the traveller's rest.

On the edge of the town stood the hotel of Herat, a huge place, a cross between a fortress and a palace. Through imposing gates and laid-out gardens we drove, ravenously hungry now that our anxieties were temporarily over and looking forward to sleeping for a night in a comfortable bed. The place looked very impressive and we were in high spirits.
But the whole establishment was merely a facade. The vaulted, echoing corridors and huge reception rooms were sparsely furnished and empty of guests. There was one other visitor, a Pakistani traveller. We were given a room which contained, simply, two bare beds. No mattresses, indeed no furniture of any kind save these two forlorn iron bedsteads. That we did not mind so much; we were self-contained so far as sleeping was concerned. But food: the visions of chicken and piles of rice began to fade, and soon died altogether. There was no food whatsoever in the hotel.

The mock hostelry appeared to be staffed by two young men. One, with lanky hair and a matching moustache, drooped wearily against the wall and tried to explain; the younger stood back a pace, gazed vacantly into the middle distance, and industriously picked his nose. By six o'clock that evening it was all too clear that we would get nothing to eat until the following lunch-time. All food had to be ordered at least eight hours ahead. A fatalistic outlook is more than necessary in the Middle East, but it was almost impossible on this occasion not to explode with exasperation.

Back in our room, Nita was sitting listlessly on the sagging bedsprings, completely fatigued and hungry to the point of weakness. I told her the news and it was the last straw. She burst into tears and flung herself across the bed. The tremendous strain of the past days, the lack of nourishment, and the thought of what was yet to come were more than she could bear; now we were without food for another long period. It was miraculous that she had not folded up before. I raved and ranted up and down the room cursing the expedition, the scooter, the Afghans and their accursed, blistered land and the whole of Asia in general. I was very close to tears myself.

Telling Nita to try to sleep, I stormed out of the hotel determined to get food from somewhere. 'Surely,' I told myself, 'these damned people must eat at some time or the other.' After roaming half-around Herat I managed to get hold of a packet of biscuits (tea biscuits imported from England) and a can of tomato soup. Not much, but better than nothing. When I got back, Nita had recovered in part from her despondency and had assembled our cooking equipment and made the room look as inviting as possible.

Over the soup, into which we dipped the sweet biscuits, I looked closely at my wife for the first time in days. Beneath the dark tan she looked drawn
and thin and her eyes were large. This malnutrition was getting beyond a joke. For my part, I was noticeably weaker and found it a great effort to lift our valise, or even manipulate the scooter. Since leaving home, our health had improved steadily, reaching its peak in eastern Turkey. From Teheran, however, we had begun to deteriorate; particularly Nita, who had suffered the debilitation of 'Teheran Tummy'. The ghastly track on which we were driving and the anxiety of the journey all added to our troubles both physically and mentally. We started one of those alluring 'never again' discussions, which alleviated some of the strain. Yet curiously, we had known before we started that it was to be an extremely tough undertaking. We had experienced heat and deserts and anxiety in Africa; it was nothing new. What struck us as so strange was the fact that we had been aware that there would be times of great emotional stress and real hardship, yet we had started unhesitatingly. The road to the horizon is inviting enough to overshadow all the pot-holes along the way.

It is sometimes necessary to plumb the depths in order to reach the heights. On any expedition of a modest nature, the rise and fall is frequent; luck has a pretty big role. In Afghanistan and in Herat particularly, we experienced utter misery and elation in the space of one short day. Somehow we lasted through a long foodless night, kept awake by the howl of pariah dogs and the protestations of our stomachs, and we kept our self-control through an interminable morning, tormented by the savoury smells floating from the kitchen of that gaunt mausoleum.

At noon, our hunger was appeased with enormous bowls of rice and what I think must have been three or four small chickens, with many side dishes. Eating slowly, we gradually increased our intake, until, after an hour and a half of practically conversationless feeding, we withdrew, heavy and replete. And so our fortune turned.

We met Hyatulla at the petrol pump, where, after many flourishes of our British passport, the reluctant and militant keeper (attendant would be a gross misnomer) grudgingly gave us two gallons of the precious, rationed liquid. Hyatulla was the driver-owner of a brand-new petrol tanker, bound for Kabul. Rotund, jovial, about thirty years old, he possessed an instantly likeable open face, olive-tanned under a well-fitting astrakhan cap. From the moment of meeting this modern hillman, most of our worries vanished. Fortunately for us he took it on himself to become our host, guide, and protector. It was very dangerous, he informed us, to travel alone through
the mountains and deserts to Kabul. We would do better to go in convoy with him; that way we would never lose the track and most of our baggage he would carry in the cab beside him. It sounded very attractive. We would be able to throw our less heavily laden scooter around more easily, keep up a higher speed, and perhaps spend many more miles in an upright position. Nita politely but firmly refused a seat in the tanker, preferring the wilderness to the possible amorous advances of a hot-blooded Afghan. Her initial fears and my uneasiness regarding such a possibility were soon allayed. Hyatulla was a gentleman.

We spent the rest of that blistering day languishing in the hotel that provided cool shade if little else, while our new-found friend completed his business. Then, as the sun set and the sting went out of the air, we set off; probably the most unusual motor convoy ever to leave Herat: a long pencil-shaped silver tanker, followed at a respectful distance by a buzzing scooter carrying two people very anxious not to lose sight of the rapidly moving dust cloud ahead. This, apart from resolving into a patch of dancing, hazy light as darkness fell, did not reveal itself again as something tangible until, having covered seventy-eight miles, we stopped at a thatched chai house in the village of Shind-Dan.

Put like that it sounds easy, smooth, and uneventful. But those seventy-eight miles were a nerve-racking ordeal. It would almost certainly have been easier to have kept up a twenty-mile average around a ploughed field. Somehow we managed to keep our marker in sight and amazingly our scooter covered the distance at the fierce pace without disintegrating. The prospect of another hundred miles repeat performance after a half-hour break was not over-appealing. Beating the clouds of dust from our clothing we stamped in front of the cosy charcoal fire where the samovar was steaming, stretching audibly, while I tried to straighten my reluctant arms from a handlebars position. There would have to be a change of tactics.

Fortunately, Hyatulla had among his other qualities the gift of observation. He told us that, as he was in no hurry to reach the capital, we should be travelling slower on the next lap. We accepted this statement graciously and blessed him silently for being the perfect host that he was.
The Forbidden Land (Chapter 7, Shind-Dan to Farah, Afghanistan)

(In the village of Shind-Dan) The samovar bubbled and we sat on the still-warm sand, sipping hot sweet liquid and absorbing the pungent atmosphere of the night. Stars, glittering in their icy millions, roofed the dark shapes of the nearby sandstone mountains, making a powerful and compelling background to the murmur of the hill village, with its clink of brass ewers, soft chatter of voices punctuated by the howl of a dog or the bray of a disturbed mule. The supreme tranquillity of the wilderness was briefly ours. Very briefly, for we had barely finished our second glass of tea when a disturbance a little way up the road brought us rapidly to our feet. A couple of shots rang out, shattering the peace and reverberating along the rocky valley. Everyone rose and trotted along to see the cause of what Nita and I hoped was a waste of precious bullets.

At the other end of the village, where a hasty barrier had been erected across the track, it was apparent that the shooting had been in earnest. A heavily loaded truck lay slewed across the main street and there was a group of turbaned tribesmen gathered round a central figure.

As we drew nearer I noticed that the front offside tyre of the immobile truck was in shreds, in the best film tradition. Hyatulla motioned us to stay in the background as he went forward to the edge of the crowd. We waited and watched, mystified by the proceedings which were evidently coming to a head, for everyone was talking at once and there were some angry gestures and much fingering of knives and rifles. As we stood, apprehensive though intrigued, another posse of men strode past us, headed by a tall figure, wearing with his robes, glossy riding-boots and a French-style military cap. His henchmen were armed to the teeth, though more orthodox in their dress; these latest arrivals burst through the group without ceremony and dragged the protesting central figure to one side. Nita grabbed my arm and suggested we return to the peaceful end of the village, but I was far too engrossed in this little drama to leave half-way through the performance.

Three of the officer's band broke away, swarmed on to the back of the truck and started to slit the bags of merchandise with their knives; the plot was beginning to unfold. Back in the centre of this very late-night performance, the police officer was dealing out summary justice.
He questioned the lorry driver curtly, pointing to the truck frequently. The driver was vigorously shaking his head in between anxious glances at the stem men surrounding him. The climax came when the officer motioned the biggest of his men forward, who promptly cuffed the agitated driver with great force across the side of his head. The suspect cowered but remained silent. The officer signalled again. Once more the wretched prisoner had his protecting arms dragged away and again a slap, almost equal to the rifle shots, echoed on the night air. This last herculean, perfectly delivered clout did the trick; the prisoner spiralled into the dust, scrabbled dazedly for a moment, then hastily sprang to his feet to start talking and gesticulating at great speed. At the end of this rapid tirade, the officer, who had listened patiently, making occasional notes, had him led away down the street-still babbling his innocence-presumably to the police station.

When it was all over, Hyatulla told us the story. The slapped one had been ferrying contraband across the border from Pakistan. Our friend showed us a sample from one of the sacks: a hard white substance in pellets about the size and shape of granite chips -he could not give it a name in English-but said that it produced a milk-like substance when fermented. I can only surmise it was hashish or some similar narcotic; I still have the little nugget which has turned greyish with time and perhaps one day I shall have it analysed. Hyatulla showed us the cunning way in which the stuff had been distributed throughout the rest of the load; half the bags containing rice and the other-the forward bulk-contraband. The driver, who had at first disclaimed all knowledge of his dangerous cargo, was soon persuaded with the good old-fashioned lie-detector that perhaps he did know a little more about this illicit traffic than he at first allowed.

The truck was roped off and guarded and the officer, with Hyatulla's help as interpreter, apologized to Nita and me for the somewhat forthright manner in which he had dealt with the errant truck driver. He assured us, however, that his treatment was absolutely necessary, for without the show of force he would be laughed out of his position within a month. Looking at the tough crowd around us, I could understand that perfectly.

The anger of the villagers towards the drug-runner was not due to social righteousness: it was only that the procuring of the forbidden fruit would now be made considerably less easy. Hyatulla implied that the prisoner would probably have a very thin time for the next few weeks for being
caught red-handed. Someone had obviously tipped off the police and the man with the outsize headache was probably wondering glumly just where he'd been too garrulous.

On through the night, we traversed more barren mountains over a track of treacherous scree and soft sand. Frequently our guide vehicle slowed down and we followed it delicately through precipitous detours round washed-out bridges. Some of these chasms were twenty or thirty feet deep, marked only on either side of a black yawning pit by two or three little stones laid across the track, signposts, of course, being non-existent.

However, the pace was now much more leisurely, thanks also to Hyatulla's consideration. As the sun rose over the horizon, we crossed a vast desert plain and arrived in the historic town of Farah, as the first smoke wisps were rising from the cooking fires.

For the whole of one day we rested in the centre of Farah, drinking tea and demolishing small bowls of rice and chicken, which Hyatulla delightfully described as 'meat of hen'. As the morning of that day wore on, the sun struck down ferociously. We lay on a carpeted chai-house floor which was roofed with thatched reeds. Periodically a small boy with an earthen pitcher would douse the roof above us with water, when magically, the oven-like heat would drop steeply for a few blessed moments and the clouds of sleeping mosquitoes which were disturbed in hordes were easily tolerable in preference to the heat.

Farah was very hot indeed, because the town lay in a desert basin almost at sea-level. On any journey of this nature there are bound to be places and situations that retain a dream-like quality in the memory of the traveller. For me Farah was one such place. I remember lying in a half-waking, half-sleeping state on the hand-woven rugs, looking out through the opening facing up the main street. The turbaned figures, stray dogs, children (energetic despite the blazing sun), swirling wraithlike in the shimmering heat, all seemed to be the visions of a dream. Nita lay sleeping beside me, completely unconscious as she always was after a night ride; but sleep would not come completely to me that morning and I could only gaze at that primitive street scene, with the scooter wheel intruding before me. I remember distinctly studying the tyre and marveling that the tiny structure could carry us across such wild country without being cut to shreds on the jagged flints. I drank deeply from the pitcher standing at my elbow and
waited impatiently for the cool of evening.
The Forbidden Land (Chapter 7, Kandahar and onwards, Afghanistan)

For the next two days we skirted another vast mountain range, running south of the sandstone ridges, passing occasionally through bare, scorched villages: Khurmalik, Kala-i-Kirta, Dilaram. We slept beside the scooter, dog-tired and barely able to unroll the sleeping-bags. To the south of us the heat rolled in endless blistering waves from the uninhabited and terrible Dasht-i-Margo desert, enveloping us in an almost unbearable cloak. To keep moving was the only antidote to the fierce air; but even moving alleviated only a little of the discomfort and our clothes were constantly saturated with sweat. I could feel it running down my back and my forearms glistened until they became coated with the thick dust that we had by now learned to live with. We would ride for three hours, dismount, stiff and msoaked in our own moisture, only to move off again after a brief rest to seek out and hold that precious breeze that was self-created. Through this inhospitable country we followed the indentations of Hyatulla's truck, anxious to put this hated stretch behind us with all speed.

On the fringe of the savage Dasht-i-Margo, the burning inland desert, I felt for the first time impatient of our friend's strict adherence to his religion. Until now the frequent prayer interludes had been welcome periods of rest from the severe strain of driving, but in the endless hell of sand and heat we began to dread the five stops each day, which left us gasping in the hundred or so degrees; shadeless, save for the shelter of the truck. Indeed, I began to wonder whether the fuel encased in the roasting tanker would explode before its destination was reached. When, therefore, we arrived at ancient Kandahar-scene of the fantastic march from Rawalpindi by Lord Roberts and his army-and Hyatulla told us, with crestfallen expression, that one of his truck springs had broken, we felt that perhaps this was a blessing in disguise.

Kandahar offered us a spider-infested rest-house, with a decrepit shower-bath constructed from old petrol cans, minus door, over which I stood guard while Nita washed away some of the fine dust. Brushed and clean, we went back to the town centre where our friend was busily searching for a replacement leaf-spring. We held a conference and discovered that Hyatulla was likely to be at least three days before resuming the journey. That settled it; we would push on to Kabul alone.

The first day out of Kandahar we made very good time. We travelled
slowly but kept at it, and the tortuous miles fell in a mounting number behind us. When we pitched camp eighty-five miles nearer our objective we were in high spirits. The desert had given way to more mountains and the climate was infinitely more bearable. It was still very hot, but there was scenery other than the accursed sand flats, and even an odd patch of parched vegetation which thrust up here and there from the rocky landscape. We had only seen one other vehicle, a Russian lorry, which overtook us in the early part of the morning. As dusk turned rapidly to darkness we ate frugally and hastily, anxious only to crawl into our waiting sleeping-bags.

The next morning, still jubilant, we set off as the sun rose. My high spirits did not last very long, however, for, from the back of our overworked mount, an odd 'clicking' noise was apparent above the exhaust note. I hoped fervently that it was merely a piece of stone caught in the tyre tread, hitting a part of the frame. As yet it was not urgent in its repetition, but it was a warning not to be ignored, although on the stony road between Kandahar and Kabul, in the desolation of Afghanistan, there was little to be done. I had a horrible suspicion that it was the rear-wheel bearing cracking up, which later proved to be the case. There was no spare bearing or oil-seal with which to replace the broken parts. We would just have to keep going and trust to luck that the abused components would not disintegrate before we reached some repair facilities. Nita, whose ear was not attuned to mechanical peculiarities, rode blissfully unaware that at any moment we might be rendered totally immobile.

I glanced around at the sandstone mountains, bare and silent; at the ball of molten fire that hung in the leaden sky above; at the rugged rock-strewn track ahead; and hoped.

Wishing we had stayed with Hyatulla, I mentally calculated our food and water supplies and concluded that they would not last more than a day. Quickly my joviality evaporated. A maimed machine, food and water dangerously low, and as yet endless miles to traverse before the capital could be reached. Although we had the whole of the sun-drenched world to ourselves, which we normally loved, at that moment we would gladly have exchanged it all for a city.

The following day our lonely journey was broken. On the horizon wisps of smoke rose vertically into the breathless evening sky, and we found a party
of nomadic tribesmen, surrounded by their camels and goats and all the comforting gregariousness of their kin. The men, lean and leathery, owned magnificent horses: high-spirited, jittery beasts, bright of eye and glossy of coat, despite the parched earth.

At first I thought our reception was going to be hostile. The men glared suspiciously at the scooter and at us. They were, of course, all heavily armed. We pulled up, warily, and dismounted, smiling brightly and eyeing with undisguised envy a huge joint of meat which was roasting over an open fire. A number of ragged though healthy-looking children stared unwinkingly at us and retired behind their mothers; one or two burst into tears. But we continued to smile and approached confidently, despite the growls of huge, fiercesome Afghan dogs.

An old man rose from beside a cooking fire and approached us. He ignored Nita, and stared hard at me for a long moment. The rest of the tribe made no movement, simply hanging on the old man's actions. I began to feel somewhat uncomfortable, with those two gimlet black eyes boring into mine, and had almost capitulated in the game of nerves when he slowly raised his right hand. I shook it eagerly and heaved a mighty sigh of relief.

After the old man had greeted us, the scene changed miraculously. The women bustled about their work and smiled in friendly fashion at Nita, scarcely bothering to replace their veils, which constantly fell away from their faces as they bent over their cooking pots; they were, however, careful to keep their backs turned to me. The menfolk crowded around, smiling and appraising everything concerning our unorthodox expedition.

Regarding the circle of bearded faces with the kohl-smeared eyes, I felt it would have been difficult to assemble a more villainous, murderous-looking bunch. But I have long since learned not to judge by appearance alone. They offered us some of the choicest cuts from a freshly killed beast, and for the second time in our lives we drank camel's milk from a gourd. As neither party could understand the other's language we talked in mime, showing our appreciation of the welcome food by rubbing our stomachs. They in turn imitated us astride the scooter, and mimicked the sound of our engine with surprising accuracy. Everyone laughed, as the humorist of the tribe excelled in his entertainment and went scarlet in the face imitating the tortured sound of an over-revved engine. They implied, with much pointing to the far horizon and with hands cupped to ears, that
they had heard us long before we had seen the smoke from their fires.

We finally increased our popularity by giving short pillion rides to some of the younger lads. While we were manoeuvring for the twentieth time between the camels and goats, one passenger, waving exultantly to his brothers, let go with both hands and fell into the dust. I almost expected a hail of bullets from the quick-tempered tribesmen, but an almighty cheer rang out and they laughed uproariously at their companion's mishap. Apart from a few abrasions he was unhurt and, if anything, more friendly towards us from that moment than were the others.

We camped that night between a couple of smelly camels, with our gear huddled around us as a precaution against the many goats who devoured anything within reach.

As is the custom with all nomadic tribes, their day started well before dawn and long before the sun rose they had broken camp and the women were tying the last bundles on to the horses and camels, while the men crowded around a communal hookah, smoking gravely and intently. The young lad who had been thrown from the scooter on the previous evening pressed a piece of well-roasted goat-meat into my hand as we said our formal goodbyes. We watched our entertaining and colourful hosts disappearing obliquely from the main track, a little self-contained hand, bound for some remote corner of this cragged country. Tough as nails, the women as well as the men, it was a mystery how they ever wrested a living from this barren, scorched earth.

The 'clicking' noise of the machine grew steadily worse; even Nita remarked on the irritating, persistent noise. When the speedometer needle crept past the 35 m.p.h. mark the clatter was horribly pronounced. The hours went by and at 30 m.p.h. we negotiated the rock-strewn track, conscious all the time of the fierce sun striking down from almost overhead. We spoke little during those hours, our mouths parched and muscles aching, yet almost frantic to reach Kabul as quickly as possible.

Briefly stopping for food I gulped down my share of meat, smoking, pacing up and down the while, quite unable to sit and relax, anxious only to remount the scooter and put more and more of those arid miles behind us. I felt that if we could only complete the stretch with all possible haste
we could do it before the back wheel collapsed. Any motorist will know the feeling. The commonsense side of my sun-dazzled brain said slowly, slowly, but my throttle hand was working independently and the whole time our speed range was right on the edge of the danger mark.

At three o'clock that afternoon I realized, to my horror, that even travelling at 30 m.p.h. the 'click-clacking' was becoming louder. There was a respite of a few miles and the hateful metallic tapping began again. At five o'clock we had, seemingly, the whole of Afghanistan to ourselves and a vehicle that was out of action. Molten grease, oozing from an almost red-hot rear hub, ran in depressing rivulets through the thick alkali dust, in visible, final revolt against the beating it had taken.

The worst had happened. The big question mark that had hovered over our heads from the beginning of the adventure had resolved itself. We had broken down in the middle of Afghanistan.
The Forbidden Land (Chapter 7, "The Middle", Afghanistan)

...We had broken down in the middle of Afghanistan....

There was only one antidote to such a situation. Occupational therapy; the first move was to set up camp. I glanced around at the hostile landscape. About fifty yards to the left of the track was a skeletal, heat-twisted tree in the centre of a miniature rock amphitheatre, and, as all men instinctively search for some sort of enclosure at nightfall, we made a bee-line for it. With the sleeping-bags laid out on the still-warm scree, and a cheery blaze which was achieved by decimating the stunted tree, our position appeared a little better.

But, for all that, the outlook was exceedingly black: the scooter wheel had now seized completely and was locked solid. The whole unit was in a pitiful mess, accentuated by the escaped grease and thick dust which coated the entire rear of the machine. Only a new bearing would effect a complete repair. One hundred miles from the Afghan capital, our scooter had finally succumbed. It was understandable.

We had water, a small piece of the meat given by our tribesman that morning, and one water-melon. We reinforced the meat morsel with innumerable cups of tea, and sat by the dying embers of the fire to watch the moonlit track for any signs of something that might conceivably carry us and our broken-down vehicle into the capital. There must be a truck of some kind sooner or later. With some foreboding I hoped fervently it would be soon.

Most Afghan drivers prefer to cover their mileage at night but, of course, when we most needed it there was an uncanny dearth of transport. It is unusual, even in Afghanistan, for a whole night to pass on the main track between two major cities without some vehicle groaning past, with straining engine and turbaned driver bouncing fatalistically from rock to rock. But by eight o'clock the following morning what remained of our confidence had almost evaporated along with our water supply.

As another silent, blazing day began, I looked around at the wilderness and the bare hills and punctuated my chain-smoking with worried oaths at our misfortune. Nita seemed quite calm, spending hours trying to pin-point our exact position on the map. The day dragged on with infinite slowness and we felt ourselves to be the only living creatures in the world.
Late in the afternoon I climbed a nearby bluff to gaze at the deserted ribbon of track, willing something to disturb the empty, shimmering horizon. The situation was rapidly deteriorating. We could not sit beside the track indefinitely and remain alive.

At dusk, our anxious vigil was suddenly and mercifully brought to a close. A faint hum grew gradually louder and presently a vehicle, enveloped in its own dust cloud, drew slowly nearer. The smiles of delight on our faces froze, however, when the thing was close enough to be seen in detail. An ancient, crumbling relic, well-nigh impossible to describe, it wheezed along—miraculously under its own power—a truck which had to be seen to be believed.

Despite the disappointing appearance of this contraption, the thing was still mobile and our excitement at the thought of rescue was not dimmed. We blessed the Samaritan who slowed up and stopped at my frantic waving, and marvelled that this travelling junk-heap could traverse the savage country between Kandahar and Kabul.

The driver was a cheerful little Mongol, with a yellow, smiling face beneath a woolly astrakhan hat. His mechanic was a more villainous-looking individual, possibly having acquired his ferocious expression through dealing with a very sick piece of machinery. But, once again, appearance was deceptive. He took command of the situation in a trice; after he had shouted orders to half a dozen tribesmen who magically appeared from odd comers of the top-heavy shapeless mass, the whole lot disembarked to see the queer little machine which had to be hoisted on to the already groaning roof.
Somehow, with only a couple of crushed fingers here and there, the scooter was lifted on to the mountain of assorted luggage and lashed securely into position. Then, after the whole assembly had taken the opportunity to say prayers, Nita and I were jammed in beside the driver, the mechanic spat deliberately on his gnarled hands and swung the crank handle ferociously.

After several minutes' cranking, during which time we all watched with fascinated gaze as the mechanic's face turned various hues and his eyes began to bulge with the exertion, the engine lazily and teasingly caught on one cylinder, which was the signal for the driver to become galvanized into action. He hammered the accelerator pedal at a furious rate until all cylinders were more or less firing, engaged first gear with a herculean effort, and we were off.

The mechanic whipped out the starting-handle and flung himself frantically at the side of the truck, the driver being quite unperturbed at the man's plight, and about half a minute after we were under way the dust-smeared, monkey-like face with its shock of black hair appeared fleetingly, upside down, at the driver's window. All was well, and we settled down as best we could in the very cramped space.

As the incongruous home-made wreck trundled along I wondered whether we should not have waved our rescuers on and waited for something a little more roadworthy; but we were mobile at least and in spite of the awful pitching motion, which increased alarmingly as we hit consecutive pot-holes, we were now moving forward. With this much comfort I fell into a
deep sleep, drugged with the combination of petrol fumes and vibrations.

For Nita, however, the luxury of sleep was denied. I awoke some three hours and sixty miles later, to find my wide-awake wife staring intently at the track ahead, throwing an occasional terrified glance at the swinging roof above. The impish Mongol driver was enjoying the situation enormously. On some of the more treacherous ravines and crevasses (which he bull-dozed with a display of nonchalance), he could not resist taking his eyes from the track to watch the reaction on Nita's face as we swooped down the acute gradients at a speed more suited to a Grand Prix racer than an archaic rattletrap. Aware of the driver's amusement, she endeavoured to maintain a bored gaze at the far horizon, but her worried expression reappeared with every hazard and was emphasized when we made our own road round washed-out bridges. Some of the river banks were horribly steep. The more Nita registered concern, the more the grinning driver was amused, until, on one frightful chasm, when he pulled out all the stops for a maximum effect, we hit the rocks at the bottom of the pit and promptly shattered the back-axle.

Then it was our turn to laugh—or would have been had the surroundings been more amenable. As it was we could only look daggers at the crestfallen driver and at the rear wheel, which now lay parallel with the rusty chassis. The rest of the passengers, dust-coated and muttering, disembarked again and wandered off to do a spot of praying.
The Forbidden Land (Chapter 7, Kabul, Afghanistan)
Nita and I sat apart from the rest and tried to find a solution to this latest setback. There was only one answer: another truck, preferably in reasonable running order and piloted by someone a little less demoniacal. My wife felt it would be rather nice if only Hyatulla could appear at this stage, and I agreed, although it would have been hardly possible to load the scooter on to a virtually cylindrical petrol tanker. Nita's feminine mind did not regard that as an obstacle.

'If he does come he surely must have ropes and things,' she said, dismissing my glum reception of her idea. Even with ropes, the plan might just work for twenty miles along an English road, but to attempt carrying a motor-scooter on top of a slippery bowser across the rugged Afghan terrain seemed ludicrous and impossible.

Obstacles, however great they may appear, are made to be surmounted, and I would wager that our machine was the first Prima to arrive at Kabul sitting proudly and perfectly securely on top of a petrol tanker! For Hyatulla did, of course, arrive some sixteen hours later and promptly concurred with Nita's idea, thinking it to be most practicable. Enlisting the help of the disgruntled passengers from the other truck, once more we hoisted the scooter aloft and roped it down on top of the giant canister. I doubt if that alone would have worked, but Hyatulla had the brilliant idea of getting all the stranded passengers to make a human wall by cementing themselves around the machine. The truckless mechanic completed the stability by sitting astride our mount, so completing the tableau. The passengers grumbled about leaving all their luggage with the wreck, but the driver was left to guard it and reflect on the results of his folly until the mechanic could return from the capital with a new half-shaft. None of the party was particularly sympathetic. Indeed, the mechanic seemed delighted to forsake his career for a few days.
While the Mongol driver commenced his long and lonely guard, we were racing on towards the capital, secure and comfortable in the spacious cab of the tanker with the cluster of humanity clinging fiercely to the scooter behind us. It was miraculous that they and our machine stayed in place for we rolled and pitched with regular monotony over the uneven surface.

About three hours away from the scene of the breakdown, we saw for the first and only time in the whole of Afghanistan a tiny gem of fertility, a two-mile valley. It was at the end of a particularly strenuous climb through a precipitous mountain range, chocolate-coloured with bluish peaks, reflecting the last clear rays of the setting sun. We churned across the summit in low gear and suddenly, instead of the usual khaki vista, we beheld the vivid Irish-green of the valley. We would, said Hyatulla, stop at a chai house in the centre of the valley to drink some tea.

After being surrounded for so long by the ever-lasting brownish hues, we found the emerald-green beauty of the valley was almost painful to look
upon. Apparently this phenomenon was caused by a subterranean river which ran just beneath the surface through the whole length of the valley. This unending water supply revealed what these hardy mountain people could do, given the opportunity. The cultivation was superb. Indeed, except for the dusty track, instead of tarmac road, we could easily have been in a Swiss farming community. The cattle, grazing contentedly, had a lush, sleek look in strong contrast to most Afghan cattle. There were neat maize fields and golden corn waved in the sunlight, surrounded by pleasant copses of water-soaked trees.

The village itself was a model, as though nothing but the best would suffice to go with the surrounding natural beauty. The huts were modest, but carefully thatched and kept in good repair. We rubbed our eyes and looked again. Hyatulla turned from the wheel and said, sadly, 'It is a pity that all of our country is not thus.' We nodded silently. 'But we are a very poor nation; poor, though independent. Perhaps if we were to surrender our freedom we could have valleys like this all over the country, and good roads to reach them-perhaps even a railway. But I do not think we would be as happy as we are now.' All of which, of course, was very true. The Afghan is probably one of the poorest men in Asia, but he is also extremely proud of his freedom and a life devoid of bureaucracy.

Very much later that same night we arrived at the capital. So late in fact that there was nothing else we could do but stay with Hyatulla at his house until morning, when we would present ourselves at the British Embassy.

There was not a great deal to be seen on our arrival, for the hour was very late and the night moonless. We did notice there were bitumen roads in the city centre but that there was little electric lighting. The smell, common to all eastern cities, floated in through the truck windows. We thrust deeper into the labyrinth of huddled, unlit houses and bazaars, coming to rest eventually in an overcrowded dirty street, populated at that hour by a few mangy dogs that skulked away at our approach. It was not an inviting neighbourhood.

But Hyatulla was proud of his home, and though the exterior of the wood-and-mud building looked both rickety and shabby, rectangular in shape with a postage-stamp courtyard, having once ascended the narrow, creaking stairs and entered his apartment, we might have been in the house
of a very wealthy man; as indeed we were.

Richly carpeted on both floors and walls, the room had an air of opulence. There were no visible fireplaces or windows, but the electric lighting was restful and adequate. Some of the rugs were superb pieces of craftsmanship, as were the masses of colourful silk cushions. The only furniture, a long, low table in the centre of the floor, was laden with bowls of fruit and nuts. This comfortable room, with its cooking annexe, impressed us as an example of Afghan gracious living.

We ate royally of piles of rice and chicken, and ultra-sweet candy. After the meal, conversation died; we were all, including Hyatulla, practically asleep as we sat. We lay down as we were and slept fitfully until first light.

Early next morning our friend drove us the eight miles out of the city to where the British Embassy stood, forbidding and aloof. We bade Hyatulla a temporary farewell, promising to meet him on the following Sunday evening to visit the international Kabul Festival.

While we were unloading the Prima from the tanker, with the aid of some loungers and passers-by, an immaculate Embassy clerk in drill-shorts passed through the gates with a sheaf of files under his arm. He took in the scene without a change of expression and wished us good morning as he passed. He represented to us a glorious breath of home. The sight of an Anglo-Saxon made us feel quite homesick and, weary though we were, it was only the thought of the enthusiastic welcome we hoped to receive within the high walls that kept us from falling asleep on the spot.

Ted Gamble, then British Consul at Kabul, was a veritable Genie with a Magic Lamp. He gave a warm and friendly greeting to the gaunt, dust-smeared creatures who had suddenly appeared to clutter his office. We were, he assured us, despite our hollow cheeks, remarkably healthy-looking considering our journey. He told us that the majority of travellers who reached the capital after overlanding from Persia were sent to hospital for a few weeks; indeed, the last European woman—a Belgian—had had to be flown swiftly to Bombay where she almost died from fever. We felt that a week or two in hospital between the sheets would not be unwelcome in our present state.

Our host was as perceptive as he was generous. Healthy we might have
been, but we were both finding it extremely difficult to stay awake. True, we had slept a few hours the previous night, but with a heavy weariness, the culmination of a long spell in the rough. The tremendous relief at having reached Kabul after our gruelling fight with this rugged land was beginning to have its effect. Being a much-travelled man who had seen consular service in remote parts of South America, Ted Gamble knew exactly how we felt. He led us from his serene office, kept cool by a swishing fan, across a burning compound under some green, artificially reared trees, to where his own bungalow nestled in shady seclusion.

As we entered, a Pakistani manservant stepped quietly into the entrance hall and relieved us of our luggage. Ted showed us into a delightful room, complete with dazzling white sheets on a real bed, plus a glorious, fully equipped bathroom. He told us to use the place as we would our own and excused himself to get back to some more work, and to see if the resident mechanics could do anything about our battered scooter. We needed no further invitation. Dinner would be at eight, we were told, and in the meantime we would probably like to catch up on some sleep.

It has been said that luxury is comparative, and my wife and I will remember that first day in the Consul's modest little bungalow as one of the finest in our lives. To be able to have a really hot bath in an English bath-tub, followed by a snack to tide us over until dinner-time, then to slip between cool white sheets, with full stomachs, was unutterable bliss. In fact, we could scarcely acclimatize ourselves to the swift transition. From a world of snatched cat-naps in rocky river-beds; days and nights of driving across burning, desolate plains and hostile mountains; existing on water-melon and handfuls of rice or those rare, scrawny fowls, with the ever-present anxiety over the scooter, the terrain, the uncertain water supply, and the possibility of running into murderous hillmen; from all that, to every comfort that we needed, was almost too much for our minds to accept. As we stretched beneath the sheets, Nita said drowsily, 'I'm sure we'll wake up in a wadi; but the dream is perfect while it lasts.' We slept solidly for twenty-two hours.

On the third day we were able to sit up and take stock of our situation. The long sleep had worked wonders, and the understanding, long-suffering Ted dismissed our apologies for having monopolized his guest room for so long. He assured us again that we were less trouble than most.
The major problem was, of course, the scooter. The back-wheel bearing was completely smashed and the oil-seal useless. The prospect of renewing the latter was out of the question, but there was a faint chance that something might be modified to make a rough replica of the broken bearing; although, of course, one was not really much good without the other. As we could hardly take up permanent residence in Kabul, however, we had to become mobile again somehow.

The Embassy mechanics were our saviours. They were nearly all Pakistanis, mostly ex-members of the old British Indian Army, and masters of ingenuity. They ground down an old bearing from somewhere, replaced the tattered remnants of the oil-seal, packed the hub with high-melting-point grease, and pronounced our machine to be ready to tackle anything. On a short test run into the city the repair seemed effective, save for a prominent whine from the rear end. In the circumstances I could only ignore it. Our transport seemed to be roadworthy once more.

Not so our equipment. Everything in the pannier-bags was in a filthy state. A can of lubricating oil had burst and smothered our clothing, the tent, and various other items which did not take kindly to oil. The aluminium dixies had been battered to an almost unrecognizable mass of metal and our already diminutive pile of luggage was reduced still further; this time to the limit. We threw away the tattered pannier-bags and the steel frames with them. Everything now fitted into the one valise and we were consoled in that the rear wheel now had a considerably lighter burden.
The Forbidden Land (Chapter 7, Kabul and onward, Afghanistan)
The next day was Sunday, and in the morning Ted shepherded us around the grounds within the Embassy's high whitewashed walls. The greenery everywhere and the neat, meticulously laid-out flowerbeds contrasted strangely with the landscape outside, where yellow sandy hills glowered down on the little oasis.

During our stroll we were introduced to a part of the staff, who were disporting themselves in and around a small, pleasant swimming-pool. Most of them resided almost permanently within the walls. They found enough energy to say, 'Hullo', but there it ended. The only topic of conversation was the 'bores' at the last diplomatic cocktail party. I asked one of the younger men how he liked Afghanistan. 'Well, you know,' he replied, 'I've never really seen the place. We spend most of our time here, except for the odd social visit to some of the other consulates.' He had been in the country for two years and spoke not one word of the language. He had never once explored even the immediate country around Kabul, and had only spoken to three Afghans in twenty-four months, but was apparently quite pleased with life. I could not help thinking it a great pity that there were not more men like Ted Gamble to serve as our ambassadors.

In the evening we scooted into the city again to meet Hyatulla, who had brought his younger brother along with him. We all set off through the narrow, crowded streets to the site of the International Exhibition. The big attraction for the predominantly male visitors were the female Chinese ballet dancers in their national dress. The sight of tight-fitting slit skirts to the Afghan male (whose only sight of women outside the house was in the form of walking black shrouds) was the high spot of this ostensibly cultural and educational fair. The next exhibit, in order of popularity, was a full-scale armoury. Every conceivable firearm was on show, from the latest small-calibre repeating-rifle to standard British Army small arms, Sten-guns, Tommy-guns, and full-sized mortars. This arsenal, I suppose, could hardly be called 'cultural' as described in the multi-lingual brochure, but it rated a good second best from an interest angle.

Considering the remoteness of this mountain city and its inaccessibility, the exhibition was well staged and equally well patronized by foreigners. Some very fine Nghan work was exhibited, particularly in the art and
handicrafts section. Tight though our budget was, we were unable to resist a beautifully hand-tooled, sheepskin waistcoat, the soft yellow skin covered in pleasing abstract designs with the reverse side a thick, downy wool of the long-haired mountain sheep. It cost the equivalent of ten shillings. Hyatulla was delighted that we had found something irresistible. He and his young brother were tremendously enthusiastic for us to see every part of the huge open-air exhibition and we must have walked at least ten miles and covered every corner.

It was past midnight when we finally broke up, our friends to return to their house in the city centre and we to catch a gaily painted tonga back to the Embassy. This was the moment of goodbye for us and our Afghan friend. We are both looking forward to 1960 when we shall welcome him on a visit to England.

Once away from the brilliantly lit area around the fair, our horse-drawn carriage made its way through narrow, unlit streets where the flickering light from the solitary candle-lantern on the tonga cast dancing shadows on the whitewashed walls. I felt quite uneasy during that eerie ride through the dark streets of Kabul, and was relieved to see again the stern outline of the British Embassy. I was more than ever convinced that night that one is far safer in the wilderness than in the city. We had heard of a stabbing incident which had resulted in the death of a German engineer in Kabul just before we arrived.

On the eighth day, before we were to leave to tackle the one-hundred-and-fifty-mile run to the border, Ted greeted us with the breakfast news that there had been another disappearance. A nephew of a former American ambassador to Great Britain and the Swedish girl with him had vanished without trace, in their Land Rover, north of the capital near the Russian border.

Hearing that did not make us eager to leave the haven of the Embassy. But the last lap had to be dealt with, which meant assailing the notorious Lattaband Pass, thrusting higher even than the Khyber, to a height of 11,000 feet. We should have to make ourselves as unobtrusive as possible, keep our sick engine running, and trust to luck.

So, tubbed and clean, we mounted the scooter, along with the remainder of our gear, and left a still-slumbering Embassy to face the wilderness once
again. After all, one hundred and fifty miles was not so very far. . . .
Our peace of mind, as we chugged along the solitary sand-rutted track once more, already unsettled by Ted's tale of mysterious disappearance, was shattered completely when, about a mile ahead in the early morning sunlight, there was a reflected flash. We soon came upon what appeared to be yet another all too common Afghanistan 'incident': a vehicle spattered with still-wet blood and torn from front to rear by ragged bullet holes. The driver-dead or alive-was missing, along with all the merchandise, whatever it might have been, and, strangely, the bench seat from the cabin. Nita and I stared incredulously at this mute scene of violence, and, for a moment, almost expected someone to appear from the surrounding hills and tell us laughingly that it was all a joke. But our refusal to accept the truth was fleeting. As realization grew, the hairs on the back of my neck prickled and my bowels suddenly weakened.

We glanced uneasily around us, but the rocky, deeply shadowed mountains were deserted and silent. They were now transformed from serene landmarks to sinister harbourers of danger. At that moment I was sorely tempted to turn back to Kabul, barely forty miles behind us.

Logic, however, prevailed. Perhaps there was a legitimate reason for a shot-up truck, smothered in blood and completely empty, being deserted right in the middle of the track forty miles from anywhere. I consoled myself by thinking that the murderers were probably miles from the scene of the crime anyway. I hoped they weren't making for the Pakistan border.

We made excellent time to the next village. There I tried to find some responsible person, on the low, thatched verandas where the men lounged, to tell what we had seen. There was no policeman, but an old chap with a biblical beard was pushed forward from the knot of onlookers who gazed steadily at the scooter and at us. I asked the old man if he spoke English and he said he did, but when I started to relate the truck incident only a few miles from his village, he suddenly found the English language all too difficult. He bowed politely and walked away while I was still talking. So it's like that, I thought. I took the hint, and we mounted the scooter once again and pushed on.

At the last house disappeared behind us, our day was really made: the wretched clicking noise started again from the back wheel.
Just before midday, with the memory of the morning thankfully misted a little, we approached another village. It was one of those indeterminate settlements, half skin tents and half partly completed huts. There was the usual conglomeration of humanity, all the men bearing the regal, faintly contemptuous air that is typical of almost every Afghan male. A partly nomadic clan, these were not so particular about hiding their women as the non-wanderers.

We arrived in the middle of a shooting contest. Some of the bloods were dashing about on camels shooting at empty petrol tins which were scattered about the plain. They were remarkably good shots. One of the older men proudly produced a petrol can with three holes neatly patterned in the centre, miming clearly enough for me to understand that he had achieved this from the back of a moving camel. I was at once impressed and sobered. We would not stand a dog's chance if some of these trigger-happy tribesmen decided to pick us off. No wonder these men—or at least their fathers—had given the British Indian Army such a headache a few years ago. We salaamed respectfully all round, filled our water bottle, and departed to a symphony of rifle fire.

The clicking was getting worse again and ahead, towering into the evening sky, was the last obstacle between us and Pakistan: the gigantic Lattaband Pass, a vast, rocky escarpment stretching, it seemed, up to the very clouds, with a rugged track that wound in an endless and frightening series of hairpins up and up, to the roof of the world. Our poor little scooter, protesting audibly, plodded on in first gear for anything up to half an hour at a time. It was nothing short of miraculous that the tiny engine should keep going under such appalling conditions.

But, for the second time, the expiring bearing could take only just so much punishment. By now the rear wheel was sloppy again and badly affecting the steering—a serious state of affairs, seeing that the narrow, boulder-strewn track was edged on one side with jagged walls and on the other by a sheer drop into nothingness. Already the light was tricky and it was difficult to distinguish between solid ground and crumbling edges.

After fifteen miles of climbing, the track levelled out, and for a brief respite we found ourselves in a remote mountain village. The inhabitants seemed friendlier than the plainsmen and were most hospitable. They gave us bowls of curried chicken, refusing to take payment but accepting
cigarettes politely.

While I refuelled from our two-gallon reserve can, an ancient lorry loaded with grapes for Pakistan groaned its way up the mountain and rested to cool off in the middle of the village. The driver, a turbaned, laughing character with a lantern jaw (whom we promptly tagged Tommy Trinder), sauntered over to inspect the scooter. We chatted, by signs, and when I eventually explained our bearing trouble, which I did with a practical demonstration, he was horrified. Certainly the crunching noises seemed, if anything, worse with the machine on its stand. He was so appalled, in fact, that he insisted on transporting the scooter and us over the rest of the Lattaband-apparently we had hardly entered the wretched mountains-through the Khyber Pass and down into Peshawar, where with any luck we should be able to get new parts. Well, I'd heard that one before, but Peshawar would certainly be a possibility. We were in no position, or indeed mood, to decline this generous offer. Nita, still unable to forget the morning incident, was overjoyed.

Within a short while about fifteen bearded warriors, heaving, shouting, and gesticulating, hoisted the Prima aloft again and settled it in comparative safety between the crates of grapes-those tiny, pipless, delicious grapes that are one of the chief exports of Afghanistan.

As we sat, crammed once more into a driving cab, somewhat bewildered at our good fortune and lurching forward into the night, I wondered idly how we would get the scooter back to ground level. Nita had ceased to worry about anything and, despite the manner in which our Moslem Tommy Trinder flung the top-heavy truck round blind hairpin bends, was already sound asleep.

The grape lorry rumbled through the night, stopping only twice at isolated villages for chai and petrol. Through the windscreen we watched yet another dawn lighting up the narrow gullies and defiles through which we were travelling. By eight a.m. we had reached the village of Torkham and the Pakistan frontier. The Afghan interlude was over.

A little way up the road, beyond the movable barrier, was the almost unbelievable sight of tarmac. The Afghan frontier guards were courteous and pleasant. Formalities were (for Asia) quickly completed and, still in the grape lorry, we trundled through the barrier an hour and a half later, to
be welcomed with tea and the English language. The Pakistanis were almost too kind to Nita and myself, but unnecessarily brusque with our Afghan friend. However, that is the way of nations. We got away before midday and started our assault on the Khyber.

The Khyber Pass, scene of so many turbulent skirmishes and one-time practical training ground for the British Army, was disappointing. A wonderfully engineered tarmac road, well graded, detracted from the rugged atmosphere one had expected. True, there were numerous forts standing sentinel on every strategic peak, but the pass was much wider than we had thought and did not seem ideal ambush country. It was hard to visualize wild Afridis and Pathans sniping from the craggy, heat-blistered peaks.

We stopped, almost on the very crest of the pass, to let the old truck cool down a little. From this vantage point we gazed back (something I rarely do) in the direction whence we had come. Afghanistan lay silent and brooding under a mauve haze. A land of mountain and deserts, of hardy, tough people and, even today, a land of adventure. It is still, for the traveller, an odds-on-chance-of-survival country. Worth challenging, we thought.
From the Khyber to Ceylon (Chapter 8 - Into Pakistan)
So down from the heights, from the wild mountain world, to the sweltering plains and eventually to Peshawar. The bustle and noise, the smells and overcrowded heat-dazed population made a strong contrast to the dignified, almost regal individuality of the Afghans. Teeming thousands of passive Pakistanis milled around gregariously on every street, blissfully ignoring the assortment of crazily driven cars which swerved, horns blaring, between bullock carts and meandering robed figures.

Our truck-driver friend deposited us in the middle of the market-place. Fortunately he had a lot of acquaintances and, between us, with much exertion and even more well-meant advice from a crowd of interested onlookers, the Prima was again manhandled down to ground level. Another search began to try and locate a bearing of the right size, and again we had no luck.

On the second day in Peshawar I began to feel dizzy and out of sorts and found myself cursing the situation, our sick machine, and the lack of repair facilities even more than usual.

On the third day I awoke with a high temperature and a feeling of great weakness which was impossible to fight. For the next three days I lay swamped in my own perspiration, dimly aware that something was radically wrong and wondering idly if I would ever leave the small hotel room in which I lay. From somewhere Nita procured a Pakistani doctor who dosed me with pills, prescribed a diet of yoghourt, and would not accept any fee. That gesture (perhaps more than the medicine) did much to hasten my recovery from dysentery. On the third day the fever went and I was able, with the help of my wife, to get up and dress. It was another month before I felt really fit again and reached my normal weight.

With all hope lost of a new bearing for the scooter, we reassembled the rear-end and pushed on to Lahore. There, we were assured, we would find everything we needed.
I do not remember much of that stretch. Partly because it was flat and uninteresting country and partly because, after being prostrate and foodless for most of our Peshawar stay, I found steering the scooter something of a major feat. Happily, though, the combination of a good tarmac road and a low cruising speed enabled us to reach Lahore.
Floundering along at ten miles an hour, with the most horrible rattle overriding the exhaust burble, we wobbled to the door of the NSU agents, on a wide, well-laid-out avenue of shops nostalgically called 'The Mall'. Little did we realize, as we clattered through the centre of busy, crowded Lahore, that we were to be detained for six weeks in this Pakistani city. But such, incredibly, was to be the case.

At first it was very pleasant to be convalescing in a comfortable hotel. The scooter was being thoroughly overhauled by the agents and within a week (we understood) should be like new. A new replacement bearing and oil-seal would be obtained in the city and once those elusive parts were found our troubles would be over. In theory, then, everything seemed plain sailing.

There was a novel fascination in leading a routine life again for a brief spell, and I caught up with some writing that was long overdue. We ate regularly and well in our hotel which was run by a faded Englishman who was unable to accept the fact that the British had left.

The agents continued their search for parts, while they lavished attention upon the rest of the scooter. One old metal-craftsman made an excellent panel-beating job of the torn and twisted foot-boards which had been battered almost beyond recognition by the tracks of Persia and Afghanistan. Thank God, we thought, there will be no repetition of that horror.

At the end of the first week the fun began. A wheel bearing had been fitted and, the scooter being pronounced in almost original condition, I was asked to take the machine for a longish test run to make sure that all was well. This I did, and was promptly stranded fifty miles from the city. I coaxed a lift back after a long wait and arrived at the hotel a day and a half later. Twice more, experimental bearings were tried, tested, and discarded as useless, until, heartily sick of this parade of failures, I cabled the factory in Germany to send a complete unit out, post-haste.
From the Khyber to Ceylon (Chapter 8 - Into India)
While we were waiting for this, I tried desperately to extricate the batch of new film which was waiting for us at the airline office, but this too proved to be an almost insurmountable task. We went from one Government department to another and from end to end of the city, filling in forms, declaring we were not hostile to the Pakistani Government, pleading, cajoling, ranting at the authorities to release our property.

During this time of frustration and uncertainty a young man, Abdul Qauyum Shaikh, came on the scene; he was a friend of the NSU dealers and had both influence and patience with which to deal with the red-tape. He helped us enormously and was wonderfully hospitable to Nita and me during our stay in Lahore. When all our business had been completed, save for the arrival of the new parts from Germany, it was he who arranged a long weekend trip up to the hill station of Murray, high above the arid plains.

We left a Lahore gasping in 110 degrees of heat, to arrive half a day later at the rest-house of Changla Gali, where we huddled gratefully around a blazing log fire to keep out the bitter mountain cold. There were three of us in the party: Nita and myself and a German doctor of languages, with whom we had become very friendly at the Lahore hotel. A tall, gaunt Bavarian, only thirty-five years old, owing his cadaverous looks to ten years in Russia as a prisoner of war, our companion possessed a shrewd, critical mind and a dry, refreshing sense of humour. He was a bachelor, who preferred teaching Pakistani students to his own countrymen and liked the hermit-like existence at Sunny View Hotel.

On the Sunday, while Nita stayed behind to rest, we climbed a nearby peak as the sun rose, in an effort to see the mighty Nanga Parbat, one of the Himalayan giants. We stood on the mountain and gazed into the far distance as the sunlight crept rapidly over the crystal peaks. For a second we felt we had seen the great snow-crested outline, thrusting up into the sky; it may have been a cloud formation, but we liked to think we had seen the mountain. If we had not, I had at least found a kindred spirit in this German, a man who could understand my urge to see over the next horizon.

On our return to steaming Lahore there was another hold-up while the mechanics assembled the bits and pieces (which had miraculously arrived)
in all sorts of sequences endeavouring to find the right combination. One would hardly credit that a rear scooter hub could be so complex. There was only one correct way to assemble the twenty-odd parts; otherwise the wheel locked solidly.

After a further two weeks of trial and error, the machine was once more declared to be fully roadworthy. To our surprise, and infinite relief, this proved to be quite true. We prepared for the long haul down through India to Ceylon.

What a difference the beautiful tarmac roads—a legacy of British rule—made to our progress. Instead of hard-fought fifty-mile maximums, thickly coating us in dust, we could step up our daily total to two or three hundred miles, according to our mood. But on the road to adventure nothing seems to come easily. True, we were now free from the appalling dust and horrific surfaces, but in order that things should not be too easy we had to run into the monsoon season in northern India. The rain fell steadily, a chilling, raw downpour that soaked us constantly day after day and night after night. Time and again we were washed out of our camping positions, after which, drugged with fatigue and shivering in wet clothes, we would pack our few belongings and push on without stopping again until daylight.

The whole of Delhi seemed to be under water when we arrived on yet another cold, grey morning, and the road was awash under inches of water. To our left and right, flat rice-fields looked utterly dreary in their swampiness, and I can vividly remember a dejected old man picking his way across waterlogged fields, from a saturated mud hut with crumbling walls, his flapping dhoti lifted high above his knees. He epitomized the whole depressing scene.

To make matters worse, one night after we had left the Indian capital there was a fairly severe earthquake which shook the ground beneath us and woke us with a frightening start. It was violent enough to make headlines in an English-language newspaper which we bought the next morning. This incident and the unrelenting rain spurred us along all the faster, and the scooter was forced to its maximum on the road south in search of some warmth, sunshine and terra firma.

Probably because of the bad weather, we hated the sight of northern India. Woefully overcrowded, the flat plains seemed to stretch into infinity,
dotted with thousands of stereotyped villages, drab and poverty-stricken. Everyone we met was either begging, spitting lustily, or sleeping. Beggars accosted us everywhere, terribly twisted, hideously scarred creatures who held their afflictions as close to us as they dared, whining the while for annas. After a few days one could feel no pity for these wretched people, only a growing impatience with each succeeding beggar. Through the smelly, littered bazaars we manoeuvred around sacred cows and dung and children playing in the filth, and drove through the fetid atmosphere as quickly as possible.

Throughout the long, boring haul down to Bombay I blessed the manufacturers of the Prima for supplying a robust and really audible horn. After the solitude of most of the journey so far, through the comparative quiet of the Middle East, it was impossible to drive through any of these communities without using the horn every few minutes. People just milled around in the middle of the streets, ignoring trucks, private cars and, of course, us. Once free of the towns, however, we made excellent time on the perfect road surface.

The skies were still leaden, and as we had no particular interest in architecture, we did what our friends at home considered an unprecedented thing. We went straight through Agra without stopping to see the Taj Mahal. Nita has never quite forgiven me for this. The truth was that up to that time I was disappointed in the 'magic of India'. What I had seen held for me hardly a fraction of the fascination of the African continent, and these people, with an average life expectancy of thirty-eight years for both sexes, seemed passive, carrying the visible resignation of their poverty and gross overcrowding. They did not possess the sunny lustre of the Africans I had met.
From the Khyber to Ceylon (Chapter 8 - Across India)

Night driving began to play an increasing part in our journey through India. Although neither of us had seen the country before we had no regrets that we had to traverse most of it during the hours of darkness. Possibly because we had our own mental picture of India, going back to childhood and associated with Kipling and tales like the Four Feathers, we felt that everything we saw and did and all the situations in which we found ourselves were in some way familiar, and if not actually commonplace they did not possess a novel quality. For instance, quite dispassionately we watched a snake-charmer doing his level best to entertain us. We gazed unmoved at the jaded, weaving snake and listened to the reedy piping, knowing, as everyone knows, that the snake was no more dangerous than an English worm, and we walked away feeling that it was so much nicer in expectation.

We gazed, too, at the crowded bazaars, the cows (elevated almost to deity), the stalls, and the dense throngs of slight, dusky figures in their dhotis and saris. These scenes, and the ubiquitous temples, were all (to my eyes) ugly, musty constructions, sticking up like sore thumbs and covered with faded, once-gaudy effigies of fat Buddhas and fatter cows. They seemed to squat in an aura of unwholesomeness, with dank, pungent interiors that never saw the daylight.

We inhaled the incense, the aroma of spiced, curried foods. We endured the oppressive, damp heat and listened to the reedy music that so well mirrored the thin, reedy people—all familiar and unstimulating. India, in fact, was as I had pictured it, but a black-and-white reality of a coloured imagining. Millions shackled with a fanatical religion strive to grasp the hem of the atom-age nations. Nehru, they said, had an answer to the world's dilemma; India could lead the great military blocs from extinction to salvation. As they spoke, these intense Asiatics hastily stepped aside to avoid an Untouchable, or detoured carefully round a trail of ants.

And what, we asked of these supreme pacifists, after Nehru? Who would lead the world to peace and, along with it, perhaps Kashmir to independence? At that they would suddenly show distinctly non-pacifist leanings: 'The Pakistanis are grasping warmongers. The armed might of India will soon put paid to any trouble from that quarter.' Then would follow the time-worn relating of the Amritsar riots and the word 'imperialists' would be liberally scattered throughout the conversation.
Perhaps it was only natural, but not once did we hear a word of praise for the superb road, rail, and postal systems which Britain had left behind. Not a mention of the foundations of administrative, economic, and military structure which the now enjoyed. We were told most emphatically that India had progressed only since the British had been forced back into the sea. Enlightenment had only come since the bloody partition with Pakistan. Before that, the country had lain under the iron grip of the British and had been dormant for over a hundred years.

At every village, what the Australians call 'bush lawyers' were ready to pounce on us and expound the glories of India since independence. No one likes being governed by aliens, they said. No people worth their salt like being dependent on foreign powers, and 'surely the dullest schoolboy realizes that Britain had not ruled India for India's sake'. It was useless for us to point out that, of all the colonizers, Britain replaced pretty evenly all she took in the latter part of her Empire history, that Singapore was built from a swamp, Burma developed into the world's rubber larder, and West Africa put into a position to become self-governing. But in India, where even tiny, second-class roads are as well surfaced as they are here in Britain; where trains run the length of the vast continent, usually on schedule despite the difficulties; where most of the farming, educational, and industrial structure was laid before 1947, the British are considered imperial aggressors.

Our mood of disappointment lasted about a thousand miles, from Delhi to Bombay, across the endless flat plains and the patches of semi-jungle around Indore, and on, under skies that became gradually bluer, until at long last we crossed the last range of gentle bills and dropped down to sea-level and the coast.

For a week we rested, and explored Bombay, a surprisingly clean city with many light, modern buildings. In contrast there were the slum areas and the prostitutes' quarter, known as 'The Cages'. We drove through this area one evening, to marvel that humanity could exist—let alone practise the oldest profession—under such appalling conditions. There were tiny cramped cubicles, most of them not more than six feet or so in width, with open fronts facing the narrow road. A sleazy, much-thumbed curtain conformed to some sort of modesty and the painted ladies shouted their wares with raucous gusto to all who passed by. Thousands of these creatures were
confined in the cramped quarter which is sealed off and locked at twelve o'clock nightly. To drive slowly through this den of iniquity was an enlightening experience. But it was pleasant to return to the city centre.

South of Bombay, the cloud of gloom which had hung over us at last began to disperse and it disappeared entirely when we reached Bangalore. The skies were bright and blue, the people not too politically minded and, most delightful of all, hosts of mischievous monkeys swarmed on the road and took every opportunity to tamper with our scooter.

The landscape was peaceful and friendly, mercifully not over-populated and blessed with first-class roads and clean dak bungalows. Less than three hundred miles from Ceylon (and our ship to Australia) we really began to appreciate India.

In a pleasurable frame of mind we buzzed into the state of Madras. Here, in one of the most picturesque of all the Indian states—save perhaps those in the Himalayan region—we were to tangle with a prospective assassin, witness a fight to the death between a snake and a mongoose, and experience a near-fatal accident. Life is rarely dull on the road to adventure.
From the Khyber to Ceylon (Chapter 8 - Across India)
Notwithstanding the ten years of independence, a strong English trend still exists in some parts of India. Bangalore, for instance, presents a queer mixture, rather like the town of Winchester in a tropical suit. During a one-day stop we stayed with an intrepid Englishwoman of uncertain age, who, like the hotel proprietor in Lahore, mentally refused to accept a fait accompli. She entertained us, with unconscious humour, by giving us a brief history of the town, which prefaced a fund of stories concerning mainly the military indiscretions in the old days. We were told about the Brigadier and the polo ponies, the young subaltern who had been caught at an embarrassing moment with the Colonel's wife, and the relief of the hill stations during the heat.

While the old lady talked, a host of crusty, military gentlemen glowered forbiddingly at us from their smoky canvases on the walls. The whole interlude was a fascinating glimpse into a bygone age, related by this woman who lived-heaven alone knows how in this 'brave new world'-exactly as she had done twenty-five years ago. She lived alone, apart of course from a couple of 'boys', in a bungalow which was very comfortable though not luxurious. England remained for her a nostalgic memory to be cherished, but not to be marred by visiting the land of her birth again. She would, we were told, die in Bangalore. I felt rather sorry for the old lady; she seemed so alone.

We left very early the next morning for Trichinopoly. During the night there had been some rain and the air was fresh and invigorating. The tarmac road was also greasy and treacherous, as was the laterite border. We began to sing as the last houses with their still-sleeping occupants fell behind. By six-thirty we were already forty miles south of Bangalore and in the highest of spirits. Everything was so promising that I should have known there would be something unpleasant. It happened just after we had watched with bated breath an extraordinary sight: a snake and a mongoose fighting like fury in the centre of the road.

Perhaps it was the early hour, or possibly in the struggle they had over-spilled from the lush jungle edge. But there they were, these two arch-enemies, rolling, spitting, biting, and sliding across the bitumen. I pulled up not ten yards from this deadly battle and we watched, engrossed, as the tide turned first one way and then the other. This was no walkover for the mongoose. We had seen a staged fight in Bombay, where an old man
produced both adversaries from a sack to entertain a morbid crowd, who, I suppose, derived some pleasure from seeing the mongoose swoop from the sack and despatch the snake with one bite. But this was the real thing and the snake in this drama was no drowsy, overfed bait.

Again and again the mongoose, like a flash of furry quicksilver, darted in to the attack and in return was bitten by the reptile who was a mite quicker. The mongoose was flecked with blood; obviously the snake (about three feet long and russet-hued) was not venomous.

Finally, in a last desperate bid to kill, the mongoose flung himself into the striking coils, regardless of the razor-like teeth which we could see quite clearly in the snake's jaws. Somehow, he withstood the onslaught of slashing bites, got a grip on the slippery throat and in less than half a minute it was all over. The victor dragged the corpse back into the undergrowth. For him, breakfast was served.

For Nita and me, however, the stop to watch this ferocious battle almost ended in disaster. While I had been poking about in the undergrowth to catch a closer glimpse of the mongoose, a big diesel truck had lumbered past heading for Trichinopoly, and in another twenty minutes we had caught up with the lorry and were being choked with exhaust gas. As Nita said afterwards, we should have stopped for a spell and so let the truck get away; the road was too slippery to play tag. But prudence was a missing quality with me that morning. Repeated blasts on the horn failed to shift the lumbering brute from the centre of the narrow road and the driver could not, or would not, hear my persistent hooting. After enduring five miles of choking fumes and a view restricted to flapping tarpaulin, I had had enough. I pulled out into the rough and opened up... .

We hit the washout at about forty-five miles an hour. In the last agonizing second I instinctively snatched the front wheel sideways to lessen the impact. It didn't soften the blow much, but probably saved the front forks.

The familiar montage quickly followed: a sudden and painful close-up of the ground-a fleeting glimpse of the sky with a big truck tyre flashing past a corner of my vision-a rushing noise and a shower of stars and asterisks as finale to the ghastly sequence.

The immediate aftermath, too, followed the time-honoured pattern. A shout
to my wife and the agonizing second of silence before she replied in a shaky affirmative, then a hasty scramble to cut the engine which was screaming at a horrible pitch, with the rear wheel spinning wildly; and finally a hasty pat at my own anatomy to see if it was still intact. With the machine upright once more, we leaned upon one another to survey the damage. It could have been much worse.

We placed on one side in a neat pile everything that was a write-off, including various items of shredded clothing, a broken pipe, and a pair of sunglasses. Fortunately our camera gear had been well padded. We used up a couple of bandage rolls and a bottle of disinfectant, and then made an exceedingly strong cup of tea. The scooter was still mobile (despite a handlebar which required bashing with a rock to a reasonably horizontal position). Shakily we mounted and started off down the deserted road to complete our journey.

For the rest of that day I drove carefully enough to pass any driving test and Nita, never one for recrimination, reminded me that the next time when she yelled into my ear 'Don't overtake' I might do worse than heed her warning. Meekly I agreed. When she decides to become a back-seat driver it is usually with sound reason.
We arrived, two very stiff, battered-looking creatures, in Trichinopoly late that night. The rest-house keeper thought we had been attacked by dacoits. I refrained from answering, 'Not yet'. Despite our aches and pains the historic military graves in a fast-mouldering churchyard in Trichinopoly were very interesting to us. Since the departure of the British, these had been left to deteriorate and were a sad and poignant sight, with pathetic epitaphs of long ago on their mossy headstones, the last earthly reminders of those tenacious British pioneers. Ironically, it was not soldiers' graves which predominated, but those of their families, who appear to have died like flies. Women and children, mostly children, with the dread word cholera still visible on almost every stone. Nearly all the dates were in the first half of the nineteenth century. Even in the bright sunshine, a heavy atmosphere pervaded the churchyard. We gazed silently at those crumbling memorials, calling up half-remembered lessons about Roberts, Kipling, and the Bengal Lancers. I found myself humming 'Goodbye, Dolly Gray' and feeling melancholy.

An old man, very deaf and suitably faded, appeared to be in charge of the churchyard, and he told us that before the British had left the graves had been carefully tended, with fresh flowers for nearly every grave. Now no one, save the occasional European visitor, came near the place. We took
some pictures of a few of the more descriptive tablets, wondering, as the camera turned, if there were any descendants in England of 'Harriet, beloved daughter of Lieutenant Morley and his wife Mary, died of the cholera, September the 2nd, 1813'. Or of all the other names, grown dim with the passing of time, of those who had suffered and died uncomplainingly in the Anglo-Saxon way, their last impression of the world being a glaring, brassy sky and the stench of India in their nostrils. It all seemed so futile, looking at those weathered graves in 1956. . . .

One of the great advantages for Europeans travelling in India is the cheapness of everything. Having smashed my sunglasses in the recent accident, it was imperative to replace them quickly as the dust and glare play havoc with unprotected eyes. In Trichinopoly we found a self-styled oculist who offered a first-class service. First, from a tray containing about a hundred varieties I chose the type of lenses I wanted. Then from another tray the frame was selected, hand-carved heavy-weight tortoise-shell; and while we sat in the open doorway watching the parched street scene, where the children played in the dust and the old men were drying cow-dung for fuel, the Indian craftsman at the back of the shop married the frame to the lenses. In half an hour I had a splendid pair of glasses which were exactly what I wanted, at a cost just under ten shillings.

Wearing my restful eye protectors, we left Trichinopoly on the afternoon of the second day. We were now feeling a growing impatience on this, the last stage of overland travel before boarding the ship to Australia. Australia, for the first time, really began to take on an air of reality, and we were anxious to get to Colombo. We had not left ourselves too much spare time and our enforced six weeks' stay in Lahore had reduced the safety margin considerably.

So we travelled on south, the miles flying by on the smooth, burning tarmac, and the most spectacular and exotic scenery we had yet seen in India on either side of us.

We stayed one night with an Indian Forestry Officer, whose training had obviously been completed under British tuition. He was a good host and an interesting companion, dedicated to his work and thankfully not a political fanatic. His modest bungalow, near the town of Salem, was infested with mosquitoes. We were pestered from dusk till dawn, unable to escape the hungry insects. Our dusky host seemed to be immune to the squadrons
which buzzed through the stifling bungalow. We left very early, thankful for the relief of moving through the air again, creating our own breeze and foiling the wretched mosquitoes at the same time.

About six hours later we stopped for provisions in one of the Tamil villages dotted along the road. These were happy little self-contained communities of handsome people, wide-eyed, with teeth gleaming in ready smiles, who lived their sun-soaked lives in a veritable paradise of waving coconut palms and fertile watered land, so very different from the harsh, arid plains of the north. Everywhere colour abounded and the thatched mud huts, so neat and clean, where children romped in and out, looked so wholesome and inviting that I determined to try and capture some of the atmosphere on film.

The sight of the two of us—almost as black as themselves—mounted on an extremely travel-stained scooter, caused excitement enough. When the movie-camera appeared the entire population promptly surrounded us, gazing in frank, Asian curiosity. They were highly photogenic, particularly the women with their jewel-studded noses and erect, loose-limbed carriage, gained from carrying large brass water jugs on their heads, which they did with consummate ease. A shuffling in the crowd and a dignified, white-bearded elder stepped forward. He was the headman and spoke a little English. In quaint terms he told us that we were most welcome and free to wander where we liked. An empty hut was at our disposal if we wished it, and he was desirous that we should visit their beautiful temple before leaving. We stopped three days and nights at the village, in spite of our determination to shake India from our heels at an early date. We stayed as honoured guests and every hour was full.

Sitting cross-legged, we ate the ferocious curry from large, sweet-smelling platters of interwoven leaves, and watched the expert skill of youngsters preparing coconuts for eating: from shinning to the topmost branches of the swaying palms, to severing the nut from its protective fibre-husk with deft strokes of sharpened steel rods. The palm is life, every by-product being used and nothing wasted. In a benevolent frame of mind I even managed to enjoy looking over the temple, although normally I have a horror of this kind of sight-seeing. For three days life was very good.

Unfortunately our stay was marred by a nasty incident. We returned from a
stroll, to find our hut as we had left it, save for one suspiciously empty corner: someone had taken my rifle. We searched high and low, but it had disappeared. I stormed off to the headman, furious at the theft of one of my treasured possessions.

The old man was as indignant as I. There was a hasty consultation between the elders, who then dispersed to various corners of the village. About half an hour later a crowd of them returned, dragging with them a sullen and reluctant youth who was clinging firmly to my rifle.

'Is that it?' asked the headman (or words to that effect).

'Of course it is,' I replied, and stepped forward to retrieve my property. But the youth backed away, taking a firmer grip of the stock.

'He says it was given to him by a friend,' translated our host, doubt and puzzlement written all over his wizened face. I began to lose my temper.

'Look here, that's my rifle. . . .' I advanced again, indignation overriding caution or diplomacy. The youth released my gun with one hand and reached towards the hilt of a dagger in his belt; he didn't unsheathe it but just stood there with his hand hovering. I felt, at this point, that perhaps discretion was the better part of valour. I had seen, in Africa, what could be done with one sweeping knife-slash. Nita asked me anxiously not to 'do anything silly'.

I didn't know what to do, really. We couldn't just stand glaring at each other, the thief and I. The watching crowd stood staring silently. After what seemed an interminable time, the old headman, bless him, relieved the tension. I think he must have interpreted the reaching for the knife as an admission of guilt. He walked calmly up to the pilferer and took the rifle from his hands. It was relinquished without opposition and the youth turned after a moment and walked swiftly away through the crowd; I got my rifle back in one piece.

On that note we felt it was time to leave the village. Another night in the hut, with a brooding, knife-carrying young man hovering in the vicinity, held no appeal for us. We loaded up, said our goodbyes, dismissed the apologies of our host and rode off down the avenue of palms.
Our Indian road finished at Madurai, where we caught a train which carried us across barren sand flats to the ferry at Dhanushkodi. Here we found the most officious and obnoxious bunch of bureaucrats we had ever met. Grinning, insolent groups of so-called customs officials went through our equipment with prying, curious fingers. Not even behind the Iron Curtain were we so deliberately victimized for being British as we were on the southern coast of India. With unconcealed delight our sleeping-bags and spare clothing were scrawled with chalk. Without the slightest pretence of official scrutiny the men bandied our passport about and gaped at our photographs and visas like a gang of backward children playing at administration.
From the Khyber to Ceylon (Chapter 8 - Sri Lanka)

On the ferry boat which carried us across the straits to Ceylon we met a very interesting French couple, husband and wife, who were travelling through India with only a small rucksack between them. They were really doing things the hard way, even using third-class tickets on the railway, and third-class on an Indian railway is considerably different from travelling this way anywhere else. We had passed one or two trains on our way from the north, and the appalling conditions under which the masses travel, packed into the carriages, filled us with horror. In this manner these two undaunted travellers had covered the country from the Himalayas to Madras. Three days and nights at a time under such conditions was their usual rule, they told us. I admired their spirit tremendously, but much as Nita and I like moving we could not have travelled thus. This French couple, too, had found themselves in trouble but had not escaped as lightly as we.

It had happened in Poona, where the young man was teaching languages at Poona University. He and his wife rented a small bungalow and during the first week of their arrival from France they were in the habit of taking an evening stroll. One night, three uniformed thugs ganged up on the couple (there was an Indian military camp near Poona) and attacked without provocation in an attempt to rape the French girl. In the melee that followed the Frenchman was stabbed dangerously close to the heart and for some days his life lay in the balance. The ironical part of the incident was the proximity of other bungalows where lights were twinkling and wirelesses playing; the French girl could speak hardly any English and no one heard their shouts of distress. Apparently the husband had to disperse the three assailants single-handed, which he had managed to do quite effectively by all accounts before he was knifed. Telling us about it, he raised his foot from beneath the cabin table and revealed an extremely well-made climbing-boot. He had also gained a lot of useful experience in Indo-China with the French Army and I believe that, had his wife not been in jeopardy, he would really have quite enjoyed the episode.

The ferry journey passed quickly and we had made two more firm friends who would welcome us the next time we were in Paris. The Sinhalese customs formalities were carried out slowly and at seven o'clock on a balmy, pitch-black night we stood on the pier at Talaimannar with twenty miles to cover to reach the first village and the haven of a rest-house.
All the officials we met insisted on telling us of the herds of wild elephant that roamed the area between the harbour and our destination, Medawachchiya. They seemed delighted to advise us that we would stand no chance at all if we were to stumble into a herd on our scooter. However, hunger pressed us on, and we decided to reach the village, and food, elephants or no.

So off we went, peering down the white headlamp beam, and seeing in every tree-trunk and shadowy twisted vine the grey lumbering shape of elephant. There was an almost irresistible temptation to turn round to see if we were being charged from behind. Those twenty miles went very slowly.

Eggs and bacon—the first in months—were offered for our delight the morning after our arrival. Pots of marmalade and jam with British household names were on the table and we felt more at home than we had done for a long time. Ceylon was of course independent, but the ties with Britain seemed infinitely stronger than the Anglo-Indian link.

Although the island was suffering severely from drought, it was easy to see why it was called 'The Gem of Asia'. The views from the road; the flamboyant clothing of both men and women; the thick jungle which encroached from inland, and the silvery, glittering lagoons, palm-studded and washed by an azure sea, made a tropical paradise hard to surpass. The run to Colombo was pleasant and relaxing, and uneventful.

Our arrival in the capital was the signal for the publishers' Colombo agent to lay on a reception. He was a delightful Sinhalese, who arranged for a number of radio broadcasts, newspaper interviews, and an exhibition of the battered scooter in the main window of a large department store in the city centre.

After being so long on the road, with little or no city contacts, this reception was quite overwhelming. For a few days we could not pick up an English-language newspaper without seeing our somewhat startled faces staring at us from the pages, captioned as 'The Overlanders', 'Author and wife of "racy" travel books', and 'To Ceylon on one-and-a-half horses'. The text of the accompanying articles gave fantastic distortions of the various interviews, but we didn't mind.
While the scooter was on display, we spent the week waiting for our boat and exploring almost every corner of the island in the kindly agent's Morris Oxford. He just filled it with petrol, handed over the keys, and with the smiling injunction to 'go and have a look at Ceylon', left us to our own devices.

We threw a few things into the boot and set out hastily for the interior. A week of pure delight followed. We left the steaming coastline and climbed up and up the narrow, twisting road to the cool of the tea plantations, a land of mists and cold nights with rain clouds sweeping across the mountain peaks. We could have been in the Scottish Highlands. The cold rain was a luxurious blessing and we rejoiced in sleeping with blankets over us to keep out the chill air.

We saw Kandy and the Temple of the Tooth; Nuwara Eliya, where a very good brew of beer is fermented; then down again to sea-level and the huge game reserve of Yala, right through the remote and wild eastern provinces to the stronghold of the Vedda, the aborigines of Ceylon; and, finally, back again to the hills and the cold nights.

The only unpleasant part of the tea plantation country were the leeches. We were savagely bitten on the legs during a short walk from the car, and it was only when Nita saw the dark stain rapidly spreading through my trouser leg that we became aware we were being attacked. At first I didn't realize the cause, and thought I might have banged my leg unconsciously, but as the blood continued to flow at an alarming rate and refused to congeal, it was obvious that here was no mere accident-particularly when Nita discovered her own wounds. The leeches had apparently taken their fill of us and disappeared long since, leaving a blood-flow which saturated one of my socks and half-filled a shoe.

There is a legend that in some parts of the island there are giant leeches that fall in armies upon sleeping men during the night and fatally drain them of blood. This may be only a legend, but the tiny punctures in our legs did not completely heal until a year and a half after the attack, when we were home in England. We marvelled how the native women could pick tea leaves from the small stunted bushes without bleeding to death.

Someone threw a stone at our borrowed car on the way back to Colombo from the hills. I thought it strange at the time, but dismissed it as some
childish prank, and it was not until we reached the capital again that I realized the full significance. The Suez crisis had exploded. A bomb had been thrown at the British Legation and demonstrators were marching up and down, waving banners and performing time-worn rituals.

At first the Suez invasion was given prominence in the papers, while the Hungarian uprising rated a couple of lines at the bottom of the back pages. A few days later, when that news began to develop from a trickle to a flood and the pleas went out all over the world, the reports about Hungary were given more space. The demonstrators, however, somewhat bewildered and pausing in their altercations, unanimously decided that these were diverting tactics put out by the 'brutish British', and things went on as before.

Our ship was at first 'delayed', and finally cancelled. No ships were calling at Ceylon from the British Isles, and a week of utter confusion ensued, resulting in a haggard expression on the face of the booking clerk at the shipping office.

We were extremely fortunate, however, in being able to wangle a couple of berths and one for the scooter on a South American tramp steamer, bound for Adelaide. So, hastily assembling our travel-stained possessions, with the word 'aggressors' reaching us from one side, and the apologies of the publishers' agent from the other, we embarked on the second phase of our odyssey.

THERE followed a boring interlude. Three weeks aboard a converted tramp steamer, packed to the gunwales with South American tourists on a world cruise, was more than enough to convince me that our usual method of transport held all the advantages. Three tedious weeks were barely relieved by a couple of stops at Singapore and Djakarta, and all the time the ship was a bedlam of ceaseless, excited chatter, screaming children, and brittle personalities straining twenty-four hours a day to convince themselves that they were having a wonderful time.

Mealtimes were a stampede, and I failed to understand why these Latins (including a couple of Spanish millionaires and a gaggle of 'famous' film stars) risked life and limb hurtling along the narrow gangways to fill themselves with the 'slosh' that passed as food. I would sooner tackle the Sahara in an old taxi-cab once more than face that ordeal again.
Our scooter had the most comfortable quarters, in the peace and comparative quiet of the hold, and though I had cursed the machine on many occasions I yearned for our arrival Down Under, so that we could embark on the second part of our adventure, delightfully and entirely independent. Another disgruntled Englishman who, like us, had been stranded at Colombo, felt that this pleasure cruiser could have been aptly named the Altmark.
There she was! Our goal for the past six months. As our boat steamed up the long, narrow channel from the harbour to the wharfside, a thin cheer rose on the early morning air as a sprinkling of Australians burst from the cramped cabins to see their homeland almost within touching distance. We, too, felt as though we were arriving home.

The sight of waiting families, crowds of relatives and friends in colourful, informal summer clothing, exchanging affectionate Anglo-Saxon repartee across the quayside created a welcoming atmosphere in which we were included. It was quite stimulating to hear good round oaths again in the English tongue.

And what a wonderful experience-as a Britisher-to go through the Australian Customs and Immigration. 'She's right, sport,' drawled a lean, smiling young man, eyeing our scooter and modest baggage. 'Here for the Games, or are you going to stay with us for keeps?'

I told him we would certainly like to see something of the Olympics when we reached Melbourne, but that our ultimate destination would be the Northern Territory, after a leap-frog tour from city to city until we finally reached the bush.

'Lord, you'll know more about Australia than we do ourselves by the time you've finished!' Then followed the spontaneous invitation which was so typical of Australian generosity. As with everything, they were big-minded with their hospitality, as we were to realize on many future occasions.

'When you reach Melbourne, sport, my sister lives out at Moonee Ponds. Call along and she'll fix you up for tucker and that, for all the while you want to stay there. She's a character for throwing the house open.'

'It's nice of you to offer,' said Nita, 'but first we have got to reach Melbourne.' (She was obviously thinking of our diminishing bank balance.)

'Well, that shouldn't be too difficult, should it?' said this delightfully unofficial officer, glancing at the list of countries painted across the scooter
headlamp.

Happier than we had been for at least three weeks, we sailed out of the dock gates to the accompanying cheers of bronzed dockers ('wharfies' in Australia) and set off down a long straight road into the city of Adelaide.

At last we were there, in Adelaide, our first Australian city, almost twelve thousand miles from London and home. The princely sum of ten pounds lay in Nita's purse and we were faced with the ambitious itinerary of an almost-round-Australia trip. Part two of our scoot to adventure began on that warm, sunny South Australian morning, with the somewhat gigantic query in our minds as to how we would get the money to complete our trip to the Northern Territory and its aborigines.

After a couple of hours in the sunshine of sleepy Adelaide we felt that the South Australian capital did not hold the answer. We should stand a much better chance of attaining financial security within the city limits of Melbourne. We decided we would push on directly after we had visited the NSU agents in Adelaide and had the scooter checked over and the battery (which had expired on the voyage) changed for a new one.

Adelaide, city of churches, wide streets, and veranda-shaded shops, was filled with alpaca-suited men wearing wide-brimmed hats, and women in colourful summer frocks. A nice, easy-going tempo gave the impression of an overgrown country town rather than a city. It was extremely pleasant. Contemporary buildings-some almost skyscrapers-thrust up from the wooden, shallow-roofed ranch-type houses which were the buildings of yesteryear in this the sheep-farming railhead of the old pioneering Australia. Hitching posts were still prominent and behind them milk and espresso bars, with garish American cars (outnumbering the popular British makes) parked in front.

In Adelaide we saw our first Holden, 'Australia's own car', which boasts a high-output engine with a surprisingly light body, half American and half European in style; judging by the number we saw, it must be ideally suited to Australian conditions.

Searching for the agent, we spoke to an Australian policeman who stood, peak-capped and smiling benignly, in the centre of a cluster of churches.
'Can you direct us to Elizabeth Street, please?'

'I can, but first you tell me how long it took you to make the overland trip from the Old Country,' replied the curious cop.

'Six months,' we told him.

'My word! And did you get tangled up with any wild animals or larrikins during the trip?'

'Larrikins?' I asked.

'Yeah, larrikins, bludgers, no-hopers, thieves.'

'Not once in twelve thousand miles,' I replied, not wishing to become too involved.

'My word!' said our inquisitor. 'And you mean to tell me that you and your little lady here travelled all the way on that little motor-bike?'

'On that little scooter, yes.'

'My word!' This time it was said with an expressive finality which signalled the end of the interview.

We received our directions and sailed up the wide traffic-lined avenue in search of our agent.

'I hope all the Aussie policemen are like that,' shouted Nita.

‘My word!' I replied.

We spent half a day, later, going over the Prima with a factory-trained German mechanic, who was obviously settling down nicely as a New Australian. He knew his job and in record time we were out of the shop and looking for the Salvation Army hostel (as recommended) in order to get a good night's sleep before tackling the four-hundred mile run to Melbourne. In a clean, simply furnished room we slept like the dead, and steak and eggs made an excellent change for breakfast after the insipid pasta on which we had been living during the sea voyage.
Down Under (Chapter 9 - Adelaide to Melbourne, Australia)

Leaving Adelaide with eight pounds in the purse and a full tank of petrol, we found rolling, sheep-and-cattle country on either side of us as we whittled down the mileage to Melbourne. Our first stop was Murray Bridge.

Murray Bridge was a nice little town, set in the heart of the 'butter country', and a mixture of old and new wooden buildings, some over a century old with ornate lattice-work round the doors and along the eaves, while other bungalows with butterfly roofs and built-in carports were painted in bright attractive colours.

All the shops along the main street were canopied, offering shade from the sun and shelter from the rain, and giving the advantage of being able to shop in comfort for the whole length of the street. Nita and I felt that this protective addition could well be adopted in our own country (particularly for the latter reason). This little town, with its canopies and its fly-screens on nearly every door, is typically Australian, and so are its wide streets where cars are usually angle-parked on the gravel edges each side of the bitumen strip.

Most southern Australian towns are like Murray Bridge. The bungalow builders have had the foresight to erect pleasingly individual dwellings, most of them single-storey, taking advantage of all space available.

Water is precious, even in the fertile coastal belt, during the long hot summers, and every house in the smaller communities has a conspicuous corrugated rain-butt beside it. But Murray Bridge, when we arrived on a hot November morning, had had its fill of moisture, for it was just recovering from a severe flood which had caused havoc in the vicinity and vast financial loss. Indeed, although the worst of the disaster was over, we could see from the balcony of the small hotel where we spent the night, the forlorn sight of a mill chimney poking up from a veritable lake just a few hundred yards away. But they are a tough breed in the Murray Valley, and the hotel keeper said they had learned to live with floods and the fear of them. And when floods came-as they did every few years-the people just rolled up their sleeves and their trouser legs and pitched into the wreckage. As one old' cocky' (farmer) remarked, 'You gotta pay something for living in the finest valley in Australia.'
Certainly the Murray Valley, apart from its tendency to flood periodically, was a dairy farmer's dream: rich, rolling downs, lushly carpeted with fertile grass and blessed with a very high average of sunshine. It was little wonder that the farmers felt it worth while to battle against the floods.

On the day we passed through the valley, it was hard to visualize the countryside being lashed with torrential rain. From a clear sky the warm sun penetrated our clothing and made riding on the well-surfaced road extremely pleasant. For a while we almost forgot our poverty.

Traffic on the road was not unduly heavy, and what we did see passed at a fair pace, unobstructed by side turnings or other hazards. With Murray Bridge and Tailem Bend behind us, the little townships began to take on aboriginal-sounding names: Coonalpyn, Tintinara, Wirrega.

We passed through the 'Sixty-mile Desert', which is now not really a desert at all, for there are several land reclamation schemes in operation, sponsored by the Government, where selected candidates (usually ex-servicemen) are given a liberal plot of land to develop.

One such experimental community, Keith, was a new, thriving agricultural centre, where the dust and sand had been replaced with rich, life-giving soil. We talked to the local doctor in Keith, who told us that it was far more satisfying to practise among these modern pioneers than in the centre of Melbourne. Pioneers in a sense they are, but they battle in comfort, for this little town boasts every modern facility, with strong emphasis on sporting amenities, including a floodlit tennis court which would out-rival anything in a city.

The probing and diligent fingers of the settlers, with the aid of science, are reaching farther out in every direction from the hub of the experiment at Keith. Within a few years, the doctor said, they would have to start thinking about other townships as the farming spearheads grew away from the base. Looking at the new hotel finished in gay stucco, and the line of new cars parked along the main street, it seemed incredible that, where we now stood, barely ten years before there had been nothing but sand and scrub.

After the desert came Bordertown, and, as its name implied, the last of South Australia. A board at the roadside told us 'You are now entering the
State of Victoria', and a little farther along came a series of fire-warning boards: 'This is your state; don't burn it!' and 'A match has a head but no heart; watch it!' These were the first pointers to the real danger of bush fires which menace every part of the continent at frequent intervals.

Our first stop in Victoria was at Horsham-the name-board a mile outside the town made us feel momentarily homesick. Horsham, probably so named by an early and nostalgic pioneer, was a fairly old township with a dash of modernity. High-eaved wooden buildings, wide, dusty streets and innumerable pubs make up the town centre. We filled up with petrol and oil, bought some frugal provisions and camped just outside the town. Nita calculated that we would just about reach Melbourne on our remaining cash.

It rained heavily during the night and, too tired to put up our tent, we awoke to find our sleeping-bags saturated along with the rest of our gear. That day was a miserable one. Nothing went right and the scooter played up by constantly whiskering its plug and generally misbehaving. The temperature had dropped alarmingly and in contrast to the previous day it was decidedly cold. Grey clouds scudded fitfully across a heavy sky and we chugged on in the teeth of a rising wind and icy squalls. The gum trees and the hills darkened, and I thought 'so much for sunny Australia'. A bad day, in which we had spoken to no one and which finished in Ballarat-the one-time gold-rush town-at six o'clock on a dreary Sunday evening.

'You look like a couple of well-travelled characters. You want a room for the night, do you?' We wiped the rain from our eyes and told this hotel-keeper to whom we had been recommended that we would try it if it wasn't too dear. The publican's leathery face cracked into a smile. 'Well, it won't be much but it's clean and wholesome. Park that contraption round the back and come on in for a beer. Nothing like good Ballarat bitter to keep out the cold.'

It being Sunday, officially all the pubs were closed, but here the back parlour was packed with jovial Sabbath drinkers. As we entered the cosy, fume-laden room there followed a carefully phrased series of door-bell rings, which the innkeeper's wife hastily answered, and another thirsty customer joined the throng. 'Bloody law's ridiculous,' said the host. 'A man's gotta have his beer anyway. Why the hell don't they let him sup it in comfort! It's a
good thing they decided to keep the pubs open after six o'clock,' he went on. 'It used to be murder trying to get a drink before. The" six 0' clock swill", we called it. Five-thirty and everyone finished work for the day, six o'clock and all the pubs closed. You can imagine the stampede during that vital half-hour, can't you? Well, so many blokes got killed in the rush, the Government decided it was time to put an end to the slaughter. Now we're almost, 'cepting for Sundays, civilized. Anyway, what'll you have?'

The publican introduced us to the rest of the gang. 'This here's -what's your names?-Mike and Nita. They've driven all the way on a scooter from the Old Country just to sample Ballarat bitter.'

We acknowledged the sporadic clapping and ribald remarks, retaliating by decrying the quality of the beer (which, incidentally, was ice cold and excellent), and in half an hour might almost have been resident. In the friendly and spontaneous atmosphere our fit of blues began to evaporate. The Australian beer was so good, it was difficult to refuse after the second glass, but I remembered the state of the exchequer and reluctantly declined.

We slept in a modest but homely room, listening to the cold wind howling round the inn and began to realize that Australia was certainly not all sunshine. We heard later that Ballarat was just about the coldest place in the whole country. Tucked into a warm bed, however, we didn't mind. We could ill afford the luxury of hotels, but there are times when the heart rules the head.

On our way the next morning, we took the full blast of an icy wind which cut at us for the best part of the sixty-odd miles into Melbourne.
Publicity can be very deceptive. We had pictured South Australia and Victoria as being sun-drenched states, particularly in November, which of course is almost midsummer. Yet there we were, shivering in the saddle and realizing the folly of jettisoning warm clothes, including a perfectly good pair of gauntlet gloves. Trying to operate the clutch, change gear, and front brake with one's hands swathed in several pairs of spare socks required some effort. But driving without hand covering in that icy, cutting wind, which blew direct from Antarctica, was sheer agony.

Fortunately, half-way through the journey, the sun came through the thick cloud and we reached the capital of Victoria only partially frozen. We made straight for the NSU agent in the city centre, determined first to thaw out and then to start the ball rolling in the rather hazy direction of replenishing our slender financial resources.

In Melbourne, we hit the jackpot. Within three days, with the kindly assistance of Frank, the agent, I was selling motor-scooters in the city's motoring quarter-another Elizabeth Street. And while I explained how the longest journey could be undertaken quite confidently on one of these little machines, Nita was selling books for Christmas in one of the largest department stores in the world, Myers Emporium.

There was a wonderfully festive atmosphere in Melbourne during our two months' stay; partly from the approach of Christmas but due mainly to the Olympic Games which were just finishing when we arrived. The weather was kind, and although Nita and I worked like Trojans we enjoyed every minute of our enforced stay. Another 'dinkum' Aussie befriended us and threw open his house, later finding a vacant bungalow for us about nine miles outside the city in the suburb of Doncaster.

For the next two months we settled down into a routine and the scooter was used daily as a work horse. We lived very quietly, spending only what was strictly necessary and saving the rest. Gradually the kitty mounted, mostly from our wages and from payment for articles I wrote for the local papers, and fortune smiled on us once again. Melbourne offers a lot of opportunity for the English migrant. The city is vibrant, young, and fresh. Built symmetrically on a square, all the main roads run directly from north to south or from east to west: within a short time it is quite easy to find one's way around without becoming bogged in
a maze of twisting streets.

The driving is of a fast and competent standard, and the only hand signal is the abrupt raising of the right hand as a stop sign. There is no (often misleading) arm flapping which we at home delight in using. Parking meters are in evidence everywhere, although of course we never needed them. The two most striking differences in the world of motoring in Melbourne were the use of U-turnings to branch either left or right, and the enormous number of outside sunshades which were fitted to nearly every vehicle, and are extremely restful under the hot Australian sun.

Working in a city is the best way to learn about the community and its people, as Nita and I did. The essential problem was how to get along with these near-relations. It was not difficult, but there are a few rules to be observed, minor ones perhaps, which if followed can make one's stay exceedingly happy. Not observing them, in this country of essentially outdoor Anglo-Saxons, can bring about real misery, as many people from Britain—particularly emigrants—have found to their cost.

We discussed this problem with both Britons and Australians while we were there, and began to realize the causes of past friction. Ask the average Englishman to name the country with the closest ties with Great Britain and he often replies 'Australia'; he may well have some personal link with Down Under. 'My young brother is in Adelaide—been there since '48—doing very well, too...'. Many families in the British Isles seem to have some connection with this twelve-thousand-mile-distant land, and on reflection recall that 'young Johnny is getting on well...'. Why, then, are the emigrant ships, when the cost of passage is so attractively assisted, not loaded to capacity with good British stock? And why has it become necessary for an uneasy Australian Government, concerned at the constant influx of southern Europeans, to launch a 'Bring out a Briton' scheme? Why, also, do numbers of emigrants return to Britain every week? To find the answer one must go deeper than the reasons usually given, that 'the cost of living was too high', 'we couldn't find a house', or 'I wouldn't have minded if my mother had come out', etc.

Australia resembles England in so many respects that when the new arrival steps off the gang-plank he is almost immediately open to what may possibly be the greatest single cause of ill-feeling between our two countries—comparison. He gazes around at the familiar advertisements of
his favourite cigarettes, dodges between the latest-model British cars, and armed with a district map to guide him, gapes with amazement at an Alice-in-Wonderland version of his homeland: Brighton, Preston, Kew, and Derby. Familiar names, yet alien in their jumbled setting. 'Come on, mate-get a move on!' cries a voice almost like his own, and he jumps aside to avoid the hurrying throngs in King's Cross; at every turn he is reminded of his homeland. Maybe their pubs are not so cosy as ours, he thinks, and they have private cars with checkered paint-work and not proper taxies, and they're a bit behind with all these trams. . . . Small enough criticisms in themselves, but if he is foolish enough to voice these thoughts and continue to make unfavourable comparisons it is not long before he is labelling the Australians as dour and unfriendly.

He will not lose an opportunity to tell everyone he meets that Sydney Harbour Bridge was designed by an Englishman, that Nevil Shute is not an Australian, and how much better the road surfaces are in England. He doesn't like all the radio advertising, and the boy who throws the daily paper over the garden wall instead of putting it through the letter-box, and so on. But by restraint of speech and a tactful approach at the outset, the newcomer can avoid much unhappiness and frustration that might lead to his joining the crowd disembarking once more at Southampton.

All this does not mean that a migrant, or visitor, must necessarily become a mute, spiritless imitation of an Australian in order to enjoy his stay. But it is as well to remember that his colonial brother (although tough on the outside) is sensitive regarding his growing country and does not want to hear anything disparaging about the land under the Southern Cross. My wife and I met a good cross-section in Australia during our year of wandering, and found them to be a proud, commendably nationalistic people. They will not thank you to tell them that their country is a bit of England in another hemisphere. It is not 'just like England' (or Scotland, or Ireland, or Wales), although of course in some respects there has been a very big influence from the 'Old Country'; but first and last it is indisputably Australia.

The Englishwoman's reactions to the cost of housekeeping in Australia are not always favourable at first. One housewife who worked alongside Nita in the department store, although in a comfortable position, held very strong views on this: 'It's impossible for me to glide over the practical aspects of comparison,' she said. 'Naturally, as a housewife, my chief
concern is money and whether there will be enough to keep us reasonably happy. When we first arrived in Melbourne I was shocked at the price of everything—and am still.' The thrifty housewife is baffled to find that the familiar two-shilling pieces (with kangaroo on one side) will only buy half the amount of chocolate it would have in England and, psychologically, would feel better about it if the coins were quite different. On the credit side, however, I was more than happy to pay only 4s. 10d. for two ounces of tobacco and 3s. 10d. for each gallon of petrol; and then remember that those prices were not sterling.

Because of Australia's similarities to Britain, people often fail to judge her for herself. They expect too much of her and cannot understand why they should sometimes receive less value for their money than at home. Being a nation of grumblers, and not averse to self-criticism, the Britisher can jeopardize his own position in Australia by a stream of complaints against the system which he would criticize in just the same way in England. Having chosen to try his arm in Australia, the emigrant can find (as one sandy-haired little man from Manchester did) that 'the missus and I were miles apart and I had to line up every day for two months before I landed this packing-department job. And this Melbourne weather! Talk about a land of sunshine. Been colder here than I ever was in Manchester. Four-and-six for a haircut! No National Health here, chum. You could drop dead in the street and no one would worry. . . .' Harmless and humorous, born to grumble, with consequent damage to his own chances, the little man already had visions of returning to Manchester. I remember his parting shot: 'I'm taking the wife and kids back home and you don't find us shifting again, not for atom bombs, credit squeezes, or our lousy weather. At least we'll be looked after.' So much for the product of a welfare state; too much emphasis, perhaps, on welfare and not enough on self-reliance.

'As game as Ned Kelly' is one of the highest compliments paid by Australians to a man who won't give up. Ned Kelly was a battler and a notorious bush ranger, but so great is their admiration for the tenacious Ned that he has been forgiven all his crimes (including murder) and as the years have passed and legends grown he has been elevated to a position of first national hero. As I see it the newcomer to Australia has to measure up, in some degree, to the great Ned for tenacity in wresting a living from the land of the gum and the mulga.

For the man who is determined, therefore, to overcome many difficulties,
and who is constantly on the look-out for somewhere decent to house his family and who is willing to work all day and half through the night, the chances are that soon everything will-in the vernacular-'come good'. He will not mind being called a 'Pommy'. Someone gives him the tip and he discovers that not all the modern bungalows command a fabulous rent. His colleagues begin calling him by his Christian name and he hears offers, casually voiced, to give him a hand with the new house he is building at week-ends. And so the new arrival comes of age. No longer is he a 'Pommy', but 'Out from the Old Country', a Cobber. Once this stage is reached and the images of England have receded a little, then he will probably cease to make those twelve-thousand-mile mental journeys and find that Australian friends are among the most open-hearted and loyal that a man could wish for.

The disillusioned man in the packing department had said, 'They don't look after us.' And I think I understand what he meant. In England he had known the social security of feeling that the Welfare State had his life neatly tabulated, and that the machinery behind it would deal with any contingency which might affect him. Perhaps he had just forgotten how to stand on his own feet. This, of course, is not so important in Britain today. A pioneer spirit is not a necessity. But in a young country, gingerly feeling its way to adulthood, self-reliance is essential, even in the cities.

One must have the ability to see Australia, not as a replica, but as the home of a proud younger brother, and the capacity to accept an exciting challenge as an independent person. I do not for one moment think these qualities are non-existent in the average Briton. So why, then, are not more of them sailing out there?
Two months and one week after arriving in Melbourne, we were ready and eager to leave again on the next lap—the penultimate one—towards that elusive goal, the Northern Territory. For these two months we had lived among the Dandenongs, the blue-black range of hills that encircle the outskirts of the big city, and they welcomed us back after each long day's work in the heart of Melbourne.

We had become very attached to the Dandenongs and the people who lived among them—generous, hospitable folk who had made our Christmas such a happy one, and who guided us with advice on some of the pitfalls which might face us on the long haul north. Dick Bush (manager of our publishers' Melbourne office) and his wife, Joan, smiled encouragingly and brushed aside our thanks for their hospitality during our stay. There should, he said, be plenty to write about when we reached the Never-Never Land. But first things first. Sydney was the next stop, just on six hundred miles distant. With a good road ahead, we were not expecting any misadventures on the way.

We had accumulated something like fifty Australian pounds to carry us towards the north. Optimistic though we were, it was obvious that this comparatively trifling sum would not take us all the way. We felt, however, that it would be quite enough to get us to Sydney, but after the second day I began to have serious doubts; the cash was disappearing at an alarming rate.

The scooter seemed to drink petrol, and food and other provisions we bought at the little townships cost infinitely more than the same commodities in the cities. At one of the roadside stops, we left behind the ground-sheet which had been our camping companion since leaving England, and a new one, smaller and of inferior quality, cost five pounds. Whereas in Melbourne, we had been talking blithely about a couple of days' stay in Sydney before pressing on into the bush, we now began to realize that another working spell was imminent.

The recognized route from Melbourne to Sydney is along the Hume Highway, but this trunk road (which has really been outgrown in the last decade by the tremendous volume of freight trucks which ply back and forth between the two state capitals) offers only overcrowding and a surface which has been punished unmercifully by these huge articulated
vehicles. So we decided to take the more leisurely and less frequented coastal route and go up the dirt-surfaced Orbost Highway to Canberra, eventually joining the Hume Highway for the last few miles into Sydney. And we chose well.

One hundred and sixty miles from the Dandenongs on the south coast is a delightful, expensive resort called Lakes Entrance. Picturesque in a modern manner, with brightly painted ice-cream parlours along the promenade and the natural bay filled with equally colourful little boats bobbing about on their moorings, it is a heavily populated Mecca during the holiday season for the outdoor-loving Australian. Lakes Entrance was the last we saw of such partly Americanized communities until we reached Canberra.

Although the Orbost Highway is a dirt road, the scenery is magnificent. For two days we rode through the cathedral-like silence between the forest giants, gums and ghost gums, stretching their smooth trunks for anything up to a hundred and fifty feet into the air. We camped, slightly apprehensive of the almost solid silence of the forest, grateful for the glow of the camp-fire and lulled to sleep by restless kookaburras; their strange, haunting cries are quite startling until one gets used to them.

After the cool, dark forest came the cattle country and sheep land, treeless, save for the occasional twisted stump, where the sun blazed and the road always disappeared into infinity. Unbelievably, on the last part of the road to Canberra, we found it almost impossible to locate a camping spot for the night. High wire fences ran flush with the road, discouraging the use of woods and valleys as overnight stopping places.

'Wait till you get north,' said the few people to whom we spoke on this lonely highway. 'You'll have all the space you need and then some; and don't forget to watch for the snakes.' Thus we heard our first mention of the enormous reptile population of the north. Not that the south is entirely devoid of natural menaces. Melbourne has her tiger snake; Sydney, her trapdoor and funnel-web spiders; not to mention the sharks in the waters around both capitals. Farther north in Brisbane and beyond there is the dreaded taipan snake and the death adder, together with the equally horrific sea-wasp which leaves its victims to die writhing in agony. The land of Waltzing Matilda may not boast any dangerous big game, but their little pests make up in potency for their lack in size.
Fortunately, however, we had no brushes with any of these unpleasant fauna during our journey from Melbourne to Sydney. Our pests were flies; flies, and the gigantic bull ants which bit ferociously whenever they could during our camping spells. The flies were with us all during the day, except in the depths of the forests. We never really became used to them, they were so pestiferous, especially when they tried to crawl into our mouths and noses. The only way to gain relief was to whirl our handkerchiefs constantly around our heads and pray for dusk, when our tormentors would magically disappear. As yet there had been no mosquitoes, but we were positively assured by our casual acquaintances that they would come.

Canberra must be the most dispersed city in all Australia; its very modern buildings and groups of buildings are scattered over a wide area. The shopping centre is quite cosmopolitan—for of course Canberra is the home of all the foreign Embassies as well as the seat of Australian Government—and it is quite a separate community from that of the Government offices or the residential area. All parts are connected by wide avenues, where young trees had been planted to bring shade to this originally barren site in the centre of a plain. We spent only one day in the federal capital, being so alarmed at the rapid disappearance of our cash that our only thought was to reach Sydney quickly and put an end to the financial rot.
Sydney (Chapter 10 - Canberra to Sydney)

Being water conscious—even in the fertile south—compels nearly all motorists to carry a canvas water bag slung from the front bumper of their vehicles. The water keeps cool by evaporation and the loss is negligible. Heartily sick of drinking tepid water, we threw out our standard water bottles and bought a water bag in Canberra. Of course I should have known that a water bag is no good until it has mellowed. For the first two days the thing leaked like a sieve, and as the only practical place to hang it was from the scooter bulkhead between my knees, I rode the next forty-eight hours with saturated feet. We carried our drinking water in a beer bottle while the canvas bag was being broken in, but after three days the bag magically sealed itself and from then on we had deliciously cool, completely untainted water; and a gallon of it to boot. Thus our water supply was assured when the time came to tackle the vast, arid north.

Out of the Federal State and into New South Wales, we ran into another problem: fire. On either side of the road, still-smouldering patches made their grey-black scars on the landscape and filled the air with ash particles and the acrid smell of smoke. We passed not acres of burnt fields but square miles of ruined cattle fodder, gutted gum trees, and burnt fences. Once we ran through a two-mile stretch with flames, dense smoke, and an ominously loud crackling on either side of the bitumen. It wasn't exactly dangerous, but it was almighty hot.

I pulled into a little wayside garage to fill up and give our overheated tyres a rest. From the lubritorium (Australian/ American word for grease-bay) ambled a well-built character wearing a huge straw hat, jeans, and a look of mild surprise at his customers.

'What'll it be, mate?'

We got into the usual confusion regarding the amount of oil to put into the two petrol tanks, which became more complex whenever there was any fuel left in the reserve tank, as there was then.

'Just over half a pint of oil in the tank, please, because it holds one and a half gallons of petrol, and just under a pint in the reserve can because it holds two gallons of petrol, but there is still some left in the bottom.'

The rural garage owner paused with the oil bottle and turned his head
slowly towards me.

'Y'mean to say you came all the way from Britain goin' through this palaver every time you wanted to tank up?'

'S'right,' I replied, watching anxiously lest he pour too little or too much lubricant into the fuel, 'but I only have to do it once every three hundred miles.'

'That's not much mileage here in Aussie though, is it?' he grinned.

'No, but at least we speak the same language which makes life easier,' explained Nita.

'Well,' said the bronzed garage man, 'you must be a couple of battlers and no mistake.' His gaze wandered incredulously over the travel-stained and somewhat sunbleached Prima. 'You stopping in Sydney?'

'No, we're heading for the Northern Territory and the aborigines.'

'The Territory! On that! Heck, the bull dust is a foot thick up there, you'll be drowned in dust. And how are you goin' to carry fuel and water supplies? There's hundreds of miles of nothing but mulga and spinifex.'

'It can't be any worse than Persia, or Afghanistan,' I said lightly, 'we'll make out well enough.'

'Best of luck, sports, anyway,' said the garage owner, as we pulled out from the shade of a giant Coca-Cola hoarding. And as a parting shot, 'Why don't you put a little sidecar on it? Three wheels'll be better'n two in the bull dust. . . .' 

We had reason to bless that fellow, later on, for sowing the seeds of an idea.

Joining the Hume Highway at a biggish town called Goulburn, we found that, outside the cities, Australia is very much like Britain on Sundays. Everything stops at midnight on Saturday and the only signs of life in the townships were around milk bars and paper shops, most of which were run by enterprising Greeks or Italians, or other European migrants, known
throughout the length and breadth of the land as 'New Australians'.

But if the town of Goulburn was deserted on that somewhat chilly and overcast Sunday, the highway was teeming with life. All Australians are extremely car conscious. Motoring, in fact, forms one of the major pastimes of the nation, and the Hume Highway between Goulburn and Sydney resembled the Brighton road on August Bank Holiday.

The only difference was in the great number of semi-articulated trucks, grinding their way backwards and forwards between capitals. Enormous land trains, crewed by a driver and an 'offsider', they carry all kinds of merchandise from Brisbane to Sydney and from Sydney to Adelaide; some of them even make the marathon journey between Melbourne and Darwin—a journey of something like two months on the road (or track) for the driver and his mate. We gave these monsters-driven hard to keep within time schedules—a wide berth. Long-distance road haulage is one of the most arduous jobs in Australia, and the men who drive along the endless roads are tough; tough, but friendly, devil-may-care fellows, as are lorry drivers the world over.

There are frequent accidents, particularly at night, when an over-tired 'truckie' dosed with 'wideawake' pills relaxes vigilance for a moment. Once out of control, the diesel giants can be lethal. We passed a smash-up just outside Goulburn. A sixty-foot trailer hauling refrigerators had taken its double-banked load straight through the side of a house and knocked the brick-and-wood structure down like a pack of cards. Miraculously no one was killed although a whole family had been sleeping in the bungalow.

As it was, the police, who swarmed on the scene and kept the usual crowd of onlookers at a respectful distance, told us that the cost of the demolished house and the whole load of refrigerators (not to mention the ten-thousand-pound truck itself) was somewhere in the region of a hundred thousand pounds. One of the police officers said that the Government were trying to enforce compulsory rest stops for drivers on the interstate runs, but of course the sooner they got to their destinations the quicker they could take on another load, and the more money they made. I don't know how true that may be, but it seemed a bitter twist of fate for the driver, who had come from Adelaide and was heading for Sydney, to write off his load—and probably his livelihood—so near home.
The last hundred-odd miles into the capital went very quickly, with more and more townships breaking the vast agricultural plains. We saw far less sheep and cattle than we had expected. I had visualized this part of Australia as teeming with sheep. There were flocks grazing here and there, of course, but not on the scale one would expect from the amount of Australian labels one sees in the British butchers' shops.

Still there was the mixture of strange and familiar place names: Moss Vale, Mittagong, Camden, Liverpool, Parramatta; all new, clean, and modern, although Parramatta has certain historical connections for it was, at one time in the early days of settlement, a prison town for so-called wrongdoers. Its history (as a prison) is black indeed and sometimes when I read the books of Australia's early life I am almost ashamed of my nationality. The tortures and privations we inflicted on our own people, when Australia was the dumping ground for banished Britons, were almost unbelievable. Britain should be extremely proud of these cousins who could so easily (and at one time almost did) break away into complete independence.
The pace in Sydney is faster than in Melbourne, or, for that matter, anywhere else in the Commonwealth. The traffic, and there's plenty of it, really moves. Although the city is not new and the streets were initially designed for horse-drawn traffic, there is little of the frustration that confronts the motorist in the centre of London. The pace is fast but not furious as it is, say, in Paris, and in no time at all we had whisked through at a steady forty-five miles an hour, to pull up at our destination, the NSU agents Hazell & Moore, just a stone's throw from the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge. It was a glorious Monday evening, with a cloudless blue sky over the city, and Nita and I, once more carried on the crest of a wave of modest achievement, were in the highest spirits. We had exactly £9 15s. (Australian) left.

Jack Crawford, manager of Hazell & Moore Ltd., was a tall, iron-grey-haired man of some sixty years, with an inexhaustible enthusiasm for two-wheeled travel, and, through experience, he knew the first requirements to make two hot, dusty travellers feel right at home. In his modern showrooms, we sat down in the pleasant coolness and just enjoyed the iced beer in the tall glasses, with the condensation running down the sides. No one said much until the glasses were empty. Then, under the shrewd guidance of Jack and his assistant, Arthur Knutt (a one-time Birmingham lad), we formed a battle plan.
'I bet,' said Jack, 'you've precious little cash left.'

'That's right,' I answered, not surprised; for our host seemed to know all the answers.

'Well, that doesn't matter. No man has experienced life until he's been broke in a strange place, but the first thing you'll have to do is to remedy that fault.' I mumbled agreement, regretting that our aboriginal interlude would have to be postponed yet again. 'So it's up to you to find your fortune in this big city of ours. While for our part' (here he glanced at a report on our scooter handed to him by a white-coated mechanic) 'we'll put that Prima of yours into apple-pie order. Not that it isn't basically sound, but from the first report the motor sounds a bit sick.' I said that having lived with it for so long we had not really noticed any deterioration in performance, although she was a bit reluctant on hills and sounded far noisier than we felt she should.

For our first night in the big city we were given the address of a cheap and cheerful (and somewhat doubtful) hotel off Pitt Street. It served us well for one night, however, and after a bath we slept like the dead, ready to tackle the job-hunting first thing next morning. It was obvious that at least another two months' stay was ahead of us, although I am glad now that it was-as it happened, we nearly got away with one week's stay and five hundred pounds, nearly, but not quite.

Returning to the agents in the morning we found a small Press reception waiting, and the next hour was taken up with interviews and a series of photographs of Nita and me, looking suitably rugged, adorning the scooter. We made the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald and the sequel was an invitation to appear on a television 'quiz' programme and be grilled by one of Australia's greatest comedians, Jack Davey. A master of spontaneous wit, he had us and the rest of the audience chuckling over our forerunners' efforts. His humour, though slightly sadistic, was none the less extremely funny. The dialogue, completely unscripted, went something like this.

Davey (to intense, humourless rural woman): 'So you work on the farm, huh! Out there in all weathers in gum-boots and things?'

'That's right, Jack.'
'And you don't mind being out there in all the mud and everything?'

'Oh no, I love my work.'

'Uh, huh, any children?'

Woman (with suitably hushed voice): 'No, Jack, I haven't any children.'

'Well, just goes to show, you should never have worn gumboots. . . .'

We had a choice of subject and chose Geography, in the desperate hope that we had gleaned something of the subject on our various travels. Between us we managed to scramble through the preliminary questions: where is Mount Hekla, the Midway Islands, and why is the sea salt, etc.- when suddenly the bell rang and we were in line for the jackpot.

'How much in the kitty this week?' asked Jack Davey.

'Four hundred and eighty-five pounds,' replied a sweet young thing, wreathed in little more than smiles.

Nita and I glanced quickly at one another; we were already on our way to the north, and I was visualizing my last glance at Sydney Harbour Bridge.

A fanfare of music and the usual build-up. Then, 'Here comes the five-hundred-pound-jackpot question. Which is the nearest foreign capital to London? You have thirty seconds to answer.'

Neither of us said Brussels. We went all round from Dublin to The Hague, from Copenhagen to Oslo, and rather hopelessly as a last resort, Paris. Ironically for us at that moment, Brussels was the one European capital to which neither of us had been. So, with hopes of a quick cut to the open road again dashed to the ground, we left the studio in a black mood, with ten pounds consolation and two packets of soap-flakes.

There was no alternative, therefore, but another spell of work. We made another television appearance in Sydney's 'In Town Tonight', but there were no get-rich-quick opportunities on that one. Perhaps in the final analysis it had turned out for the best. 'Easy come, etc.', being a hackneyed
but profound cliche.
Sydney (Chapter 10 - Sydney)
Someone who knew Jack Crawford knew someone else who ran a transport business, and who might want a truck driver for a short spell. I hounded after this slender lead and with a great deal of luck ran the boss to ground while he was short-handed. And thus began three months of truck driving, in and around the capital. I learnt more about Sydney in that three months than I ever would have done had we won that £500. It was an education, hard work, but fun, and I was getting paid at the rate of £1 8 per week. Nita, who industriously read all the small ad. pages in the newspapers, found comfortable lodgings at Brighton-Le Sands, about five miles from the centre of the city, where Kingsford Smith Airport flanked us on one side and Botany Bay on the other. From our window, we could look across the bay to the spot where Captain Cook landed so many years ago.

By the end of the first week, Nita had also found a niche in a fruit-canning factory and, apart from having to stand in running water all day long, found the work congenial and the pay very useful.

We used to cook in secret in our lodgings. Being frugal for a purpose, we had only arranged for bed and breakfast, and we cooked our evening meal camp style, over a tiny methylated stove. What my wife achieved on that midget was truly remarkable. We had fried meals, roasted meals (with the aid of an empty biscuit tin), toasted and boiled meals, and after the first month we began to wonder whether one ever needed more than a half-crown stove and a bottle of methylated spirit to produce all but the most complex dishes.

Every Friday night we stowed our earnings carefully away in the wardrobe, along with all the illicit cooking utensils and food stores. At week-ends we did nothing more than read books from the public library, write, or spend the day on Bondi or Manly Beach.

One gets the finest surf-bathing in the world in Bondi breakers, and provided a sharp ear is kept for the shark-warning bell, and a keen eye for the dangers of a 'rip' (a tremendously strong undertow that defies the strongest swimmers at times), water sport at its finest is there for the asking, in a warm sea of white-crested form, where one can laze all day long without feeling cold.
All the citizens of Sydney—Sydneysiders—make a pilgrimage to the coastal bays and inlets during the week-ends. Some to fish (fishing being one of the most popular sports down under; even the women angle); others to race motor-boats or yachts, but most to do the odd bit of surf-riding or simply laze on the golden sands, sun-worshipping. Their evenings are spent energetically on the whole: dancing, playing tennis by floodlight (there are tennis courts in the most lonely corners of the land), barbecuing, or just throwing parties.

The open-air cinemas are very popular. One merely drives in, parks the car, selects a microphone which hooks on to the inside of the window, and provided it is not raining one gets a good view of the giant screen with controllable sound inside the car.

Although very good for comedy films (the dialogue not being drowned in audience reaction), we found these cinemas to be unsuccessful in putting across a film of any depth; the link between viewer and medium is lost. For the managements, however, they are a gimmick that pays off, being particularly popular with courting couples.

About the middle of the second month in Sydney, when we had almost forgotten we were on an expedition, having fallen into the working routine so thoroughly, Jack Crawford 'phoned to say that the Mayor would like to see us. We were given a nice reception, welcomed officially (if somewhat belatedly) to the city and presented with The Book of Sydney, a large imposing volume of high quality which told briefly the life of the city.

The book is presented only to non-Australian visitors who, in the opinion of the authorities, might do something, however small, for the good of Australia. We were both pleased and not a little flattered to receive this exceptional gift. The last man associated with two wheels who had been presented with a copy had been Geoff Duke. I told the Mayor I was hardly likely to make a similar impact, but what we lacked in miles per hour we would make up for by distance covered.

It was during the second month, too, that Nita raised the subject of a sidecar. At first I was dead against the idea. Our one and a half horses had enough work to do without having to drag a chassis and third wheel. But my wife kept prodding, and eventually I was coaxed to 'just make a few enquiries'. Her argument, a very sound one, was that once more we should
have to tackle long stretches of desolation—rather like those of the Middle East—and now we should not be able to carry all our equipment (including a whole new batch of cine-film which we were buying piecemeal), and still stay upright in the rough. But how could the little scooter haul a sidecar? On our arrival Jack Crawford had said bluntly that it wouldn't pull the skin off a rice pudding, but that had all been remedied long since. I decided in the Australian vernacular to 'give it a go'.

Jack was receptive to the idea and told us he could fit a chassis and wheel. For the body, which had to be lightweight, yet strong enough to take a constant beating, C. C. Wakefield Ltd. came to our aid and had one hand-built to our specification.

They presented it to us with their compliments, complete with a list of gold-lettered names of the cities we had passed through and a big winged Castrol sign on the front. A seat was fashioned for Nita, who wedged herself in and packed all the gear around her.

We made several test runs out to the Blue Mountains, climbing some of the steepest gradients we could find in this glorious beauty spot, about forty miles from the capital. Nothing seemed amiss and we found that we could churn over the roughest ground without fear of turning turtle. Our midget machine seemed unperturbed by the extra weight and, if anything, steadier with a third wheel than when grossly overloaded on two. Two wheels or three, New South Wales was perfect for motor-cycling. Good roads, beautiful weather, with a minimum of rain. Despite these attributes, the nucleus of two-wheeled enthusiasts is a very small one. I told Jack Crawford that, given their Australian conditions, our own million-strong army of ardent riders would almost certainly expand, and that in spite of the unfavourable British climate a large percentage of this number would not exchange their two wheels for four—even if motor-bikes were dearer than cars. Why, then, should Australian men—most of whom had the right amount of ginger in their blood—by-pass this zestful, essentially outdoor sport and exhilarating method of personal transport?

'The women get at 'em. That's the trouble,' said Jack in reflective mood. 'Just before the war the motor-cycling movement was developing wonderfully. Plenty of road racing, scrambles, trials, and a great deal of men who rode for the pleasure of it. Nowadays the women are all car-minded and they've forced the men to think the same way. But,' qualified
Jack, 'things are gradually improving and there are an increasing number of chaps who are rediscovering the thrill of being on a saddle rather than sitting on a car seat. We do have our enthusiasts, y'know, especially on the sporting side, and the ranks aren't getting any smaller. Boundary riders on some of the Outback stations find that the motor-cycle is just about the perfect replacement for the horse; for the modern machine can go anywhere the horse can, and in a fraction of the time. You'll see plenty of riders in the north who'd put some of our expert scramblers in the shade. Fellows who ride on the rough each and every day, sometimes for a month at a time. But,' concluded our host with a smile, 'I don't think the wives get at the cattle men as much as the city women do.'

We were almost ready to start for the bush. After three months in Sydney our financial state had become satisfactorily stabilized; three months of the bustle of the city, with its free and easy life, its humour, absence of red-tape, modern outlook, and gay atmosphere. We had stayed long enough to think automatically of Hyde Park, Sydney, when anyone mentioned Hyde Park. We began to call dockers 'wharfies' and Teddy Boys and their feminine counterparts' Bodgies and Widgies'. The bright yellow number plates, prefaced with N.S.W., no longer looked faintly strange; neither did the pubs, filled to overflowing; nor the rattling trams that one had to overtake only on the inside. Nita became used to the bright, almost flamboyant fashions of the women, with their preference for vivid colour and enormous bright hats. At the end of those three months we felt that we knew Sydney pretty well. And, as always, when something has become familiar and cosy at the same time, it was difficult to leave. We did stop and look back at the great bridge on the way out of the city, but with a feeling of sadness rather than elation.

Once more we had burnt our boats. There would be no more pay packets for a while, no more comfortable routine. Once again the long black ribbon stretched ahead, and tomorrow we would relish the challenge. On the day we left Sydney we were silent, and just a little depressed.
The Going gets Tougher (Chapter 11 - Sydney to Brisbane)

At first it was easy: absurdly easy, with our newly fixed sidecar carrying Nita and all our belongings (including the weighty film) with perfect ease. The bitumen was smooth, the weather glorious, and the coastal road north running through green, fertile country: Wyong, Swansea, Newcastle. And we made our first night stop just outside Newcastle under a cluster of friendly gum trees.

In the south they had warned us of the mosquitoes, but we had taken the warnings lightly-too lightly-and in consequence were both severely bitten, although we stayed awake most of the night trying to swat the' Giant Greys'. I should think that the mosquitoes around Newcastle, New South Wales, hold the record for size. Indeed, they are not called' Giant Greys' without good reason, and their intake is proportionate to the large banded body, the size of a house fly's. Voracious hordes invaded our tent ceaselessly throughout the night and we swatted and smote each attacker with vicious satisfaction, and endured streaming eyes from a smoke fire just outside the entrance that seemed to attract rather than discourage our tormentors. And in the chill grey light of dawn, haggard from lack of sleep, we reviewed our tent which almost resembled a battlefield, with dark bodies and blood smears (our blood) liberally spattered over the tent walls and our sleepingbags.

With the first warm rays of the sun, the night raiders-more like vampires than mosquitoes-droned away, heavy and replete. Grateful at least that they were not as yet malarial, we drank tea, broke camp and got on to the road again, determined to stop at the first hardware store for a length of netting to sew into the tent opening. There should be no repetition of such torture. For the rest of the seven hundred miles run from Sydney to Brisbane, our nights were blissful and uninterrupted. Indeed, outside the net the angry frustrated whine, which in concert sounded rather like a smooth turbine engine, actually lulled us to sleep.

The days were warm and gradually, noticeably, getting hotter. The scooter, with its new lease on life from the hands of Jack Crawford in Sydney, ran perfectly. And the country became more vast. In Australia it is necessary to drive much farther than anywhere else before something happens; before there is a change of scenery and one of those clean, low wooden stereotyped townships appears on the horizon and another fleeting glimpse is seen of canopied shops, angle-parked cars, and glittering silver rainwater
butts. As a rule one drives straight through, knowing the sequence will be roughly the same. Farming country to either side, full and blooming, yet rarely does one see signs of human interference. I wondered how or when they tend the vast acres. Then the square signboards: Tarree, Kempsey, Macksville (or whatever the name happens to be), and the highway widens momentarily to become a high street which shimmers in steep perspective as one automatically peers ahead through the heat-haze to see where the straight line of this latest human community ends.

In two or three minutes the last weatherboard bungalow is left behind, the reverse side of the name-board is there (as one knows it will be) on the opposite side of the road, and once more the silent pastures take over and the traveller is alone again with the infinite, sweeping arable plains. If the average focal length of an Englishman's view is fifty feet, an Australian's is two hundred yards. In England we speak of 'a mile up the road'. In Australia it is ten miles. Nita and I caught on very quickly and would talk quite seriously of a place being only three hundred and eighty miles up the road.

We were following the Pacific Highway and although the sea was only a few miles east of us, we saw nothing of it until we reached a delightful and decidedly unstereotyped township called Coff's Harbour. Here was a town with a difference. The streets twisted a bit, there was variety in the shops, including one or two bookshops, gunsmiths, and an espresso coffee bar, together with throngs of people in holiday mood who had obviously chosen this colourful and pretty harbour as a holiday resort.

The sea was only a stone's throwaway and many of the inhabitants and visitors were strolling about in beach-suits or shorts. We met a holiday-maker from Perth who had driven right across the continent just to spend a week in this, his former home. I agreed it was nice, but I didn't think it was that attractive.

Another potpourri of nationalities in names: Grafton, Casino, Coolangatta, and we purred on over the border into Queensland. After Brisbane, we were told, the going would get tougher, but it is better on a journey such as ours to live for the day and we did not worry about what might lie ahead, enjoying the quiet, uneventful run from the capital of New South Wales to the capital of Queensland in much of a holiday spirit. For after our working spell in Sydney, those seven hundred miles with good roads and frequent
towns through fertile, coastal country were very much in the nature of a holiday. It was therefore in a buoyant mood that we arrived in Brisbane. Buoyant, but without any sense of achievement, because what we had just done was, comparatively, routine. Had we known what lay ahead on the next lap we would have undoubtedly felt more grateful for such a comfortable stretch of our marathon journey.
The Going gets Tougher (Chapter 11 - Brisbane)
Roy Markwell was something of a celebrity in Brisbane, particularly in the world of yachting, which enjoys tremendous popularity in this sub-tropical coastal city; he was also the NSU agent for Queensland, having one of the most modern motor-cycle and scooter showrooms and offices I had yet seen.

While the Prima was undergoing a routine check-over, Nita and I were given the run of Markwell's luxury sea-going yacht. We lived in it for a week—at least, when we had time, for during those seven days we were indoctrinated-high-pressure transatlantic style—with Brisbane. We saw the city both by daylight and at night from the famous One-Tree Hill, a fantastically high viewpoint, laid out on the summit of this near-mountain with flower gardens, bursting with exotic tropical blooms and built-in palm-studded vantage points, from which visitors could see, on a clear day, almost every building in the city. Queen Elizabeth on her visit had apparently been very impressed with the panorama which is, from One-Tree Hill, virtually an aerial view.

Brisbane is really a beautiful city, and if ever Nita and I decided to live permanently in Australia, Brisbane would become our home. It is modern, with a sophistication that is not brittle, and the pace is fast but free and easy. The people are very Anglo-Saxon, but the balmy, sub-tropical warmth has successfully eliminated all the traditional Anglo-Saxon reserve. The inhabitants work hard and play hard under almost continuously blue skies and starry, cloudness nights. People sleep on their verandas, or in the gardens, or on the boat-decks of their launches. There are also a great number of pubs in the city centre, and everyone appreciates the ice-cold beer. My wife and I have visited a good many cities, and we decided that Brisbane offered a little of everything, including one unique feature—trams designed so that they are actually pleasing to the eye. Never before or since have we seen anything to approach the sleek, streamlined public transport of Brisbane.

We took a number of pictures: of the University; the gigantic new hospital (almost completed); the daily parade of policemen in their smart uniforms as they marched past a quite historic (for Australia) town hall; the main street of dazzling white and pastel-shaded near-skyscrapers; the modern bridges spanning the river; as well as that little sidecar of ours, which had just had two more names added in gold letters to the rest of the list. I told
the manager of Messrs. Wakefield's that perhaps their signwriter had been
jeopardizing our good luck in adding Darwin prematurely, but he laughed
and replied that so long as I stuck to the right oil, Darwin was a piece of
cake!

Once again the Press became interested in our venture and we made two
radio broadcasts and received several write-ups in the daily and evening
newspapers. These were included mainly on account of our unorthodox
mode of transport, but one of the newspapers (the reporter who interviewed
us having at one time travelled the world on a shoe-string) gave an
intelligent and an interesting account of our reasons for travelling as we
did, with all its fascination of uncertainty, and an explanatory note on our
aspirations. It is extremely difficult for some people to understand the
motivating power which drives us and others like us to go voyaging to the
ends of the earth, away from the comforts and security of home. It was nice
to come across one reporter who did.

On the latter part of our journey from Sydney, I realized that there was one
modification that simply had to be made to our sidecar, namely, the fitting
of a stronger wheel spring. This overloaded part had gradually sagged with
the miles and had thrown the steering all out of track, so that it was
necessary for me to exert tremendous pressure on the left handlebar,
particularly on steep cambers and, in consequence, had made Nita's ride for
the last hundred miles or so virtually suspensionless.

Roy Markwell went to a great deal of trouble to rectify this uncomfortable
fault and, not satisfied with his first efforts, had a special heavyweight
spring forged in his modem workshops, where, he told me, they could
produce any part of a vehicle except the chromium-plate or the tyres. He
certainly proved this with a robust spring for our sidecar.

There was also the problem of extra fuel and water supplies which our
friends told us would be imperative if we were to reach Darwin safely.
That we had traversed the Middle East solo, with less water than we
carried in the new water bag, made no difference. The Australian bush,
they said, was a lot lonelier than any other part of Asia, including
Afghanistan. Two more one-gallon cans, therefore, were fitted into a metal
rack which was slung between the sidecar and the scooter in the convenient
space behind my legs. We filled one with ready-mixed petrol and the other
with fresh water. According to my calculations, we could now say goodbye
to civilization for a week and four hundred miles at a time.
Our brief stay in Brisbane had been something of a social whirl, with the sight-seeing, broadcasts, lunch-time club talks, and parties. We had also fitted in a prolonged visit to a nearby animal sanctuary, treading in the footsteps of Armand and Michaela Denis and Walt Disney, to take pictures of most of the native fauna of Australia, including some delightful koala bears—one of which rode with obvious pleasure on the back of a long-suffering Alsatian.

Nita went into a rhapsody when the owner of the sanctuary permitted her to hold one of these 'cuddliest' of all furred animals. In Melbourne she had raved over a semi-tame platypus—that weird hybrid of the animal world with furred body, duck bill, and webbed feet. She had loved its sleek, velvet-like coat, but was wary of the two dew-claws on the back feet which held poison ducts. But the koalas were totally devoid of any self-defence mechanism and were, in fact, made to be cuddled.

When we left Brisbane we said goodbye to what I had come to regard as the Australia of Cities: Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane, all lying in that narrow fertile collar which hugged the coast, where there were water and life. Ahead lay the inland, the bush. A few more towns of moderate size, then, at last, the silent empty land of the spinifex and the mulga. At last we were on the doorstep.
The Going gets Tougher (Chapter 11 - From Brisbane)

The plan was to continue up the coast as far as Townsville, then turn westwards inland to strike the road that runs from north to south through the centre. The road that would carry us to Darwin. Our first stop, then, would be Townsville, a mere eight hundred miles north of Brisbane.

Our first night stop from Brisbane was just one hundred miles farther on. It seemed a pretty puny effort on the face of things, particularly as the whole hundred miles had been on good bitumen. However, we found a glorious camping spot on the edge of a wood, with a fresh bubbling river which had been half-heartedly dammed for some reason or the other, and which provided a large patch of white clean concrete on which we could spread all our gear, together with the sleeping-bags.

There are always incidents on a trip, or situations which remain evergreen in the memory long after the bulk of the journey has been forgotten. And that first night out of Brisbane was perfect. For one thing we were still clean, with all our clothes neatly pressed and ironed; and the scooter was giving me no worry. We were both fresh in body and mind, stimulated by our Brisbane interlude, and our conversation was mainly a post-mortem on the Queensland capital. To blend with this contentment was the warm, balmy, tropical night-beautiful-with a huge full moon and a cloudless, starry sky, velvet and friendly over our heads.

Toughened by our ceaseless travelling, we scorned the tent (as we did for the rest of the trip unless there was heavy rain), considering it almost profane to shut out the beauty of the night sky. Our camp-fire crackled merrily, giving off the fragrant aroma of burning gum leaves and billy-brewed tea. And for once the beam from our headlight, which was focused on our supper activities, was free from the myriad insects which usually converged directly I switched it on.

But that perfect spot offered something more. The river was teeming with flathead, those succulent fish that are sought after with rod and line every week-end by a million Australians. I caught three huge, healthy specimens in as many minutes with the gut line and hook which had been carried hopefully and, until that night, unsuccessfully among our belongings.

Nita discarded the tin of bully-beef and was kept frantically busy frying, to keep pace with my catching, scaling, and gutting. We ate royally. Four
huge fishes apiece and as many billycansful of tea. Replete and supremely content, we lay for a long time on top of the sleeping-bags, savouring the glowing warmth of the fire and the beauty of the night.

Just after midnight, when we were drowsily contemplating the exertion of getting into our sleeping-bags, the silence of the bush was shattered by the approach of an unsilenced pick-up truck – a 10 cwt. open-backed vehicle which is one of the most popular forms of transport in the open country-referred to as a 'utility' or, more commonly, a 'ute', which careened down the dusty approach lane, stopped by the weir and deposited a young husband and wife and a brood of jean- and T-shirted offspring.

We watched-as yet unnoticed-while father skinned a rabbit and dissected it for bait in the glare of his headlamps, and the rest of the large family prepared the lines for what was obviously going to be an all-night fishing session. When preparations were completed and the group stood solemnly in line, each peering intently at the dark, shadowy water, we strolled across and bade these nocturnal sports good evening.

'Good night,' said the husband cheerfully, evincing, with typical Australian mien, no surprise at our sudden appearance. 'How you goin'? By now used to Australiana with its rare use of the English' good evening' and automatic enquiry about the state of one's well-being, I replied in kind: 'Good, thanks.'

We talked for a few moments about fishing and the fun of night-angling, while the kids-pert and lively without being precocious-were laying bets on who would make the first catch.

'You're English, ain't you?' asked father.

'Yes,' I replied. 'But don't hold it against me.'

'Why should I? So's she.' He nodded in the direction of his wife. The wife, in her middle twenties, slim, fresh-complexioned, and dressed in jeans and sweater, introduced herself in a quaint Yorkshire accent. She looked far too young and petite in the moonlight to have mothered such a large and energetic brood. Nita said in surprised admiration:

'Are they all yours?'
'Good Lord, no,' the girl answered. 'Only four of 'em are mine. The two others are our neighbour's kids.' The humour was unintentional; four children are commonplace in Australian families, and six, or even eight, create no surprise.

The fish were beginning to bite and the catch on the bank was taking on an impressive size. The husband and I talked about Australia and Queensland, while the women chatted reminiscently about England. After about an hour the husband laid down his line. 'Time for smoko, Mary, I'm parched.'

We sat round their camp-fire, drinking the billy-tea while the children swarmed over our scooter outfit, and mispronounced the list of names written on the side until the four of us were rocking with laughter.

'Y'know,' said the Aussie, 'you're the first two Poms I've met in a long time who really speak English I can understand.' This was not the first time we had heard this remarked upon, and I was interested to find out why.

'Well,' said the husband. 'Most of you people pronounce words like my wife used to when I first met her down in Melbourne. Y'know, "reet" instead of right; "coop" and not cup; that sort of thing. And when they're talking quickly I can't understand 'em at all, dinkum.', And you mean that every Englishman you've met had a Yorkshire accent?' I asked.

'Oh, I wouldn't say they were all Yorkshire,' said our friend, with a furrowed brow, 'but most have got a burr or a brogue of some sort. Of course, some's worse than others, but you're the first couple I've met who don't have me straining to catch what you're sayin'. Course, even you say "charnce" instead of chance; still, your English is pretty good," he concluded with a twinkle.

Can this mean that there is more migration from the provinces than from the London area? Judging by the number of our own countrymen whom we met in our Australian travels this would seem to be the case. A man from Halifax, Jarrow, or Swansea is more likely to adopt Australia as a new home than his compatriot living in the suburbs of London. Perhaps the Londoner is less adventurous than his provincial brother. Or do Londoners lead a fuller and more satisfying life?
Despite the ribbing of each other's accents, the young couple seemed to be a perfect blend of northern and southern Anglo-Saxons. This was reflected in the children, who possessed the easy-going, devil-may-care attitude of the Aussie together with the shrewd, cool-blooded temperament of the canny Yorkshireman. These were no crazy, mixed-up, hypersensitive kids!

I asked the wife if she ever yearned to return home to England, and got a very emphatic no for an answer. She said that at first she would have given anything to return home to the familiar world of her childhood; but after five years in a sub-tropical climate among people who became increasingly friendly, without most of our worries about international tensions, in their own house (built by themselves on their own land without any petty restrictions), plus all the little things-like being able to fish in the middle of a warm night anywhere she cared to toss her line-how could she go back to a world of concrete and grey skies? She would like to visit, of course, if they ever saved enough money. 'But,' she said, as her ruddy, sun-bronzed arm lifted the billy for the sixth time, 'I'm a Queenslander from now till the day I die.' Which indeed this one-time Yorkshire lass was.
The Going gets Tougher (Chapter 11 - Towards Townsville)

On the second day out of Brisbane, the tarmac to all intents and purposes ended. There were one or two half-hearted stretches of pitted bitumen, but they were full of craters and petered out after a few miles.

Seven hundred miles to Townsville and most of it on the rough. We lashed the equipment down more securely, put a few more pounds pressure into the tyres and settled down (if one can call it that) to a very bumpy interlude. There was no longer a comforting traffic stream passing busily either way, no petrol stations every few miles, and the townships began to string out until it was almost an event to pass through one.

Maryborough: with a main street so wide that driving down the middle we could barely see the tin roofs on either side of us in the shimmering midday heat. At every stop now, we found ourselves beating the thick alkali dust from our clothing—quite like old times.

But if the route was rugged, the scenery was beautiful. Majestic gum forests, blue mountains, rolling hills and valleys; all of it sparkling in the bright air; one of Australia's finest coastlines. We camped among the gums, entirely alone, just whenever we felt tired. Sometimes we drove all night, or part of the night, sleeping during the heat of the day, or vice versa, depending on our mood. At night the bush was peaceful and fascinating, and at last we began to feel something of the mystery of this timeless continent, where man is but a newcomer. For the first time we watched a timid wallaby, and saw it as the strange marsupial it really is. And watching the wallaby and conjecturing on its unique anatomy I thought of the platypus, the koala, and the wombat, which must have roamed this vast, silent continent in thousands, together with other creatures a million years extinct, about which man has but a glimmering of knowledge.

As we progressed farther north, through Bundaberg sugar-cane country where dark-skinned Italian migrants toiled like beavers cutting the cane amid the choking ashes of the clearing fires, we became more and more aware of the great silence—a silence almost tangible, especially during the middle of the day. To shout would be a profanity. Perhaps that is why the true Australian is considered to be taciturn—never chatting—speaking only when there is something of import to say.

We arrived in Rockhampton after a night of gruelling driving over tracks
which tossed us about like a cork at sea and ripped our rear tyre into shreds on jagged rocks. It was absolutely necessary to get hold of a replacement tyre and tube. Rockhampton, a large community by North Queensland standards, with the status of a city, is the half-way point between Brisbane and Townsville: it must be one of the few cities in the world that has a main-line railway running up the centre of one of the main streets.

Here, in this sleepy easy-going place which gives the traveller the impression that the rest of the world has somehow passed it by, we met one of the nicest couples on the whole of our continental journey: Vivian and Joan. Viv, as everyone called him (abbreviations being the rule in the southern hemisphere), had shown enterprise and courage in opening the city's first scooter centre. In Sydney or Melbourne he could not have put a foot wrong commercially, but in Rockhampton I regarded him as something of a hero, for scooters appeared to be about as popular there as roller-skates in Torquay. But he was a typical Aussie battler, and he was going to convert the populace from push-bikes to scooters, whatever happened.

He and his wife lived in a charming, spacious bungalow up on stilts, in typical Queensland fashion—a home that boasted every labour-saving device and contemporary comfort—with the exception of television. Somehow, in this Queensland town of perpetual summer, the magic box would seem entirely out of place. Our hosts had not lost the art of conversation, and after an excellent dinner of roast duck (shot by Vivian a day previously on the nearby marshes), we sat on the high veranda discussing the merits and demerits of our contrasting home towns. We discovered that each had something to offer the other, although it took us into the small hours to reach this amicable decision: that, whatever else Londoners may have to endure, they are at least free from white ants, but that well-constructed bungalows look awfully attractive on stilts. Two hundred and fifty miles to Mackay. There were a few stations along the track, but in the main it was deserted bush country; hot, dusty, arid.

It was as well we had had a new tyre fitted in Rockhampton, for we needed every ounce of tread between that city and Darwin. We drove for the whole of the second day without seeing a soul. There was only the track, the dust, and the occasional empty beer bottle lying beside the 'highway'—mute evidence of thirsty drivers. Those beer bottles! There must be millions scattered across the continent, tossed with thirst-quenched
abandon out of car windows from Darwin to Adelaide and Perth to Brisbane. I am sure that were we to visit the most unfrequented spot in this vast land, a hundred miles from anywhere (and there are plenty like that), before an hour passed the tell-tale glint of the dust-covered brown glass from the centre of a spinifex clump would be seen. All those bottles (terribly dry after roasting for months and years under the fierce sun) tend to aggravate one's own thirst enormously. It is impossible to pass a wayside pub.

Mackay is a pretty little town, built with forethought and imagination. Down the centre of the main street is a line of beautifully kept palm trees which are restfully functional, besides being a pleasant adornment. There is a fine swimming beach—Eimeo—of which all the inhabitants are rightly proud. Nita and I soaked off two days' dust in the tepid water, luxuriating in the white foam of the breakers, yet keeping a wary eye for the first signs of any curved fish-tails among the waves.

There are a great many casualties every year in Australian coastal waters, despite shark nets, warning bells, and volunteer look-outs. Not only does the sea-tiger take his toll; there are creatures far more sinister than the ravenous shark in the tropical sea off North Queensland: the giant jellyfish man-of-war, the little-known sea-wasp, and a variety of vividly coloured coral snakes. All of these creatures are immensely venomous. While we were lazing on the silver sands and drying ourselves under the sun, a fellow swimmer told us that the previous week a man had been bitten by a sea-wasp while standing in only six inches of water. He had died writhing in agony an hour later, with the doctor powerless to ease his suffering. It seemed ironic that nature at its most beautiful could be fraught with such terrible danger.

Even some of the shells which can be found on the more deserted beaches, delicately tinted and perfectly shaped, begging to be picked up, can inflict a fatal wound on the unwary. However, discounting the hazards (including those magnified out of all proportion by the Aussie, who loves to exaggerate his country's drawbacks), we continued to swim wherever there was water. Anyone who has spent days on end under the blazing north Australian sun without the protection of a car roof will appreciate that this was not foolhardiness—at least not altogether.

Another gruelling stint over a hostile track, thick with bull-dust, and we
reached Proserpine. This is an old township with a strong flavour of the Wild West, complete with bat-wing doors on the pubs and, strolling along the main street, a crowd of cattlemen (ringers), wearing high-heeled ringer boots and wide-brimmed hats. We filled the sidecar with stores, stopping only long enough to finish the necessary shopping. I did not like Proserpine; it was decrepit and dying. One old fellow we spoke to said that in a few more years it would be nothing more than a ghost town. It was a mining community, with the seams running dry, and was poor and drab; there were no compensations for its unfortunate geographical position which was low-lying and swampy. The area was infested with snakes and pestiferous insects. I dragged Nita away from the store where she was parleying with the shopgirl who had emigrated from St Albans; we filled the fuel tanks and departed.

We drove all that day and most of the night. Now we were back to Middle East road standards. The track fought us like a live thing. Great craters, with a deceptive appearance of smoothness, jarred shatteringly as we broke through the bull-dust to the jagged rocks beneath; our average speed was reduced to something like ten miles an hour.

Just before midnight it rained. No gentle patter this, but a full-blooded tropical storm which lashed us furiously, transformed the dust to quagmire, and had us shivering, when a few moments before we had been sweating profusely. The quivering, bouncing beam from our headlamp pierced the sheets of water, lighting up a path ahead which was, to say the least, discouraging. The track had disappeared and in its place was a murky lake. I pulled up at the edge and dismounted to survey the depth. Saturated to the skin as I was, it made little difference to my comfort to wade in, hoping fervently that this product of the storm would not be more than the scooter could cope with. I waded for fifty yards and discovered that on average it was about a foot deep.

Slowly, keeping the throttle open all the time, we gurgled across the lake. There was nearly half a mile of it which was not surprising, as we were traversing a valley which had rapidly filled from the overflow of rain rushing down the hills on either side of us. Nita had disappeared wisely under the ground-sheet and was visible as a glistening hump of waterproof sheeting, which remained silent and unmoving during the worst of the storm.
The rain passed as quickly as it had arrived and, although it was a wonderful relief to drive again without battling against the icy, stinging lash, there were now other obstacles. Long stretches-anything up to a couple of hundred yards-of gluey mud in which we bogged repeatedly. The only remedy for this was to get off and push, which we did almost continuously for the next two hours, with gradually diminishing enthusiasm. I think there can be few more depressing experiences than pushing a vehicle through patches of mud, soaked to the skin in the middle of the night.

There was, however, worse to come, for that ghastly night heralded what I now look back on as a Month of Misery. This was to be one of those fearful black periods which periodically engulf all expeditions—a month when we caught ourselves thinking frequently that we were a couple of blasted idiots. It took a long time to shake ourselves free from the ill-luck which dogged us. The bitterest blow fell suddenly about thirty miles from Bowen, a tiny township growing up around an opencast coal mine. Bowen! Who had even heard of the place? Certainly I hadn't. But I'll never forget that 'Sleepy Hollow' as the residents termed it in a self-deprecating manner.

For it was here that the accursed rear wheel gave up the struggle again; only this time there was no warning, no gradual deterioration. As we tore into yet another 'jump-up', trying to maintain enough impetus to get out again, the rear end hit the bottom with a sickening thud and that was that. The whole assembly locked solidly, and we were stranded thirty miles from a dot on the map, with a vehicle that was once more utterly useless. In a flash, all our plans for the miles and days ahead evaporated into thin air. We would not be able to reach Townsville for Easter and Nita's birthday; neither would we be in Darwin 'within a couple of weeks' and our money would certainly not now carry us to the capital of the Northern Territory.

We hauled the outfit from the chasm and sat down at the side of the track, almost weeping with anger and frustration. Once again I loathed the scooter, the silent, arid landscape of waving spinifex, the monstrous track, the Australian Government for permitting such primitive motor roads to exist, and—during that mood of hopelessness—myself and everything else. Had there been a possibility of being spirited home to comfort and regulated security, I should have gone immediately.
Wearily we pushed the scooter into the shade of a nearby gum tree, and leaving Nita busily brewing up-her antidote for all adversity-I grunted a dismal farewell and set off to walk along the scorched track stretching into infinity, with Bowen at the end of a thirty-mile tramp.
The Going gets Tougher (Chapter 11 - Townsville)
Ten miles from the scene of our breakdown I was given a lift by a middle-aged couple in a Holden sedan (Australians never use the word 'saloon') and we floated over the craters and dry creek-beds in a manner which I felt to be almost airborne.

'Oh, that was a nasty one,' said the wife, as the nose dipped ever so gently into another dust-filled pit. I sat morose and silent in the back seat, perversely grudging this couple their comfortable ride. What a tale they would have to tell when they returned home to Brisbane (or wherever it was), of intrepid adventure in the Mighty Outback. The dash-radio played some tinny drivel and the only sound which rose above it was the clink of bottle on glass, as the lady adventuress poured the iced beer. For them the harsh, relentless bush did not exist, save as a brassy blur that passed their windows between hotels. I cannot recollect a more severe attack of 'sour grapes' than I suffered during those twenty luxurious miles.

'Well, we're just about to close down for four days, y'know,' said the tall, grizzled garage proprietor. 'But Cyril here'll get the old jalopy goin' and pull you in, an' we'll have a look at it before we pack up.' Cyril, wiping his hands on a piece of cotton waste, pushed his wide-brimmed hat to the back of his head and nodded a silent greeting. I followed him round the back of the garage and we clambered into an ancient T-model Ford, which was coaxed and cajoled into life after much fiddling under the bonnet. The old pick-up truck wheezed her way down the strip of bitumen that ran the length of the main street and finished abruptly with the last house, and in two minutes we were swallowed by the bush.

'You're from England, aren't you?' said my companion, wrestling with the wheel as we crashed into a succession of hollows. 'Yes,' I replied, in no mood to enter into conversation. Another ten minutes passed, during which time the clatter from the engine was undisturbed by the human voice, then, 'So am I,' said the driver. 'Came out from Camberwell in '48.' 'Oh,' I replied, mildly surprised at this admission. I almost added 'why?' but let caution prevail. 'You prefer the bush to the cities then?'

'My word,' said the ex-Londoner who had forsaken his native 'not 'arf'. We rode on in silence; it was impossible to talk above the rattle.

Five hours of bush solitude had done nothing to improve Nita's spirits
either, and her greeting was a trifle disgruntled. 'Thought you'd drowned your troubles in the local pub.' She smiled sweetly at Cyril and threw me a black look at the same time.

'Couldn't get the truck started,' I explained, appreciative of the long lonely wait my wife had just had. 'There's a chance that the garage may be able to do something,' I added (by way of consolation for her hours of solitude). 'But we'll have to be quick because they're closing tonight for Easter.'

'Naturally,' said Nita. 'Have we ever broken down on a day that wasn't a bank holiday or a week-end?'

Cyril regarded our strange-looking vehicle without change of expression and piped up again.

'I come from London,' he said, his sad little face wistful for a moment under the huge hat.

'Then,' stated Nita, surveying the sea of burnished grass, 'all three of us must be crazy.'

Four hours later the future looked a little brighter. We got back to Bowen, the garage mechanics stripped the rear end and pronounced the job as hopeless, but by that time we had at least formulated a plan, and were no longer drifting on a sea of despair. What we had surmised, however, was now certain. Repairs to the broken hub were impossible—even with the necessary parts this tiny garage had no experience of scooters. So we would load the outfit on to the train and make our way to Townsville; we had the address of an agent there on whom to call and he would be able to fix something.

But the train did not run during the Easter holiday. We had four days to kill in the tiny township, and thanks once again to Cyril these were made bearable by his invitation to spend the time with him and his wife. We blessed him, disconnected the sidecar body from the chassis, loaded all our belongings into the box and heaved it on to the back of Cyril's own utility.

Half an hour later we arrived at Queen's Beach, a long strip of silver sand, deserted save for a few bungalows dotted over the landscape, most of which seemed to be in varying stages of construction.
Queen's Beach: it was as though the first arrivals at this barren spot on the Australian coastline had christened the strip of beach in a desperate attempt to give the area a personality; to tame the place, making it synonymous with people and life and all the comforting hubbub of gregariousness which would swamp the wilderness for ever. This was a sad misnomer: Had it been called Desolation Bay one would have been agreeably surprised and felt that perhaps it was not so desolate really, there being quite a few people about. I don't know quite what we had expected to see, for the township was only minute, but here was no tight-knit community but a straggling skein of dwellings-flimsy, temporary, puny efforts of man to stabilize these vast, shifting silver dunes which were being ceaselessly pulled back and devoured by the white-capped tropical sea.

Cyril possessed the foundations of a bungalow which he was erecting piecemeal, a sturdy wife who had all the qualities of a pioneer, and a large tent in which they were living with their ten-year-old boy until the bungalow was completed.

'He'll never finish it,' said Jessie, with good-humoured disgust. 'All he wants to do is swim and fish when he's not at the garage. A born idler, my husband. If I didn't keep nagging him he'd watch the grass grow over the foundations and be quite content to live in this.' She indicated the canvas walls around us. In the middle of a trestle-table a paraffin lamp burned fitfully, an irresistible magnet for a million insects. Yet in spite of their lack of possessions, Cyril and Jessie were a happy couple, and battlers in the truest Australian sense.

Nita and I pitched our own tent a little way off on Cyril's carefully marked-out two acres, and for those four Easter days we sampled the life of those two ex-Londoners who had swopped Camberwell for the bush.

The garage which employed Cyril as a general mechanic paid a wage of fifteen pounds per week, which enabled the couple to buy all the necessities for immediate living, run their pick-up truck, and pay for their building programme on the instalment plan. The plot of land had cost them two hundred pounds and they had an arrangement with the builders' merchants whereby they were supplied with material on credit terms. Someone had lent them a cement mixer, with which I became acquainted on the first day of our stay, during which Cyril laid the floor of what was to
be the kitchen. On the second day, after about an hour's work, we ran out of cement.

'Ah well,' said Cyril with undisguised relief, 'can't do nuffin' else till we get some more. Let's go for a swim.' So we gave up our toiling, walked fifty yards down the beach, and waded in just as we were; we were only wearing shorts anyway.

'Course, if my mother knew we were living in a tent she'd have a fit,' said the comfortable-bodied Jessie. 'They'd think you were a freak if you did that at home while you were building your house, but of course out here it's very different. No one takes any notice.' We were sitting round the table again, drowsy with fresh air and the balmy tropical night.

'We wouldn't be building our own house at home, anyway,' rejoined Cyril with a tinge of righteousness. 'Leastways, not 'nless I won the pools.'

'And if you won the Casket here you wouldn't be building our house yourself. You'd get someone else to do it for you.'

'Course I would,' replied our host, looking dreamily at a couple of mice which cavorted unmolested just underneath the kitchen cabinet in the corner of the tent. For the Londoner had transferred from one nation of gamblers to another. Everyone had their fling on the state lotteries which are the Australian equivalent of our own pools system. The Queensland jackpot was called the Golden Casket and paid out prizes up to the usual dizzy standards.

'If we ever land the Casket,' said Jess, 'I want to go and live at Surfers' Paradise.' (This is a glittering chromium-plated mushroom resort south of Brisbane, made fashionable by the Queensland socialites.)

'Over my dead body,' replied her husband with some warmth. It was clear that this little man, who had been born and bred in the welter of busy Camberwell, did not intend to have his halcyon days in this little backwater of civilization exchanged for anything remotely connected with a fast pace. Despite Jessie's aspirations, she was obviously extremely adaptable, and devoted to her husband, and he was one of those rare beings who had found complete happiness and contentment.

We caught the train on the last evening of the holiday, saw the still-
dismembered scooter safely in the guard's van, and settled down in a saloon compartment to chug through the night to Townsville. Our train, whose engine wailed mournfully from time to time in true transatlantic style, paused briefly at tiny whistle-stops, where one or two solitary figures hurried on or off dimly lit platforms. The station names were barely discernible in the flickering gaslight: Guthalungra, Inkerman, Ayr, Brandon, names that stirred the imagination. Why had these places been thus christened? Had a Crimean war veteran, blood-stained bandage at rakish angle across forehead, stood on a wind-swept knoll and proclaimed in ringing tones: 'From this moment I name this area Inkerman?' Had Ayr come into being on a wave of nostalgia, to the skirl of pipes and kilts and sporrans being unpacked from dusty trunks? Somehow Guthalungra was the only station that dropped neatly into place on the railway from Bowen to Townsville.
The Going gets Tougher (Chapter 11 - To Mount Isa)

At six o'clock in the morning, Townsville looked bright, colourful, and full of promise. It had, for me, an atmosphere of mixed attraction. There were the tropical palms and exotic flowers; colourful bungalows, modern and airy; main-street shops that were a mixture of Oxford Street and the village store; traffic that was driven with a Continental gay abandon, and a railway station that was solid and solemnly British. Overlooking this lively little port a solitary hill—rather like that outside Brisbane-dominated the skyline, and from the top we gained a superb bird's-eye view of the township. As we looked down on the shining corrugated roofs, like dolls' houses, I felt very confident that we should be riding forth again soon; which was optimistic but sadly inaccurate.

The agents who ran a thriving motor-cycle and scooter business opened at eight o'clock, and at first things looked very bright. We were introduced to Mr Page, the owner, who wore the regulation Townsville business dress of short-sleeved white shirt, blue drill shorts, and white knee-length socks. He had our broken transport picked up from the railway station and while we were waiting for its arrival we were offered iced drinks and shower facilities. There was an air of competence about the workshops and Mr Page's appraisal of the damage to our scooter. Nita and I, in a jovial mood, resigned ourselves to a brief stay.

But by five o'clock that evening it was clear that events were not quite going to plan. The rear hub was in a worse mess than had been anticipated. This time the alloy casing itself had been holed, the spline had bent, and one of the bearings had seized solidly upon it. However, they wouldn't give up without trying to find suitable replacements, and in the meantime we were driven out to a nearby camping ground, together with our sidecar full of belongings, to set up camp until repairs could be made. In two or three days they would manage to fix it somehow.

For the next fortnight our home was in Townsville's caravan park. A pleasant spot, with shady trees and brick-built shower baths; there was even an ironing room. We could buy our supplies at an adjacent store and the sea was only fifty yards away across the road. We met a number of interesting people who usually stopped for only a night or two, most of whom towed caravans, although second favourite was the utility with sleeping arrangements at the back of the driving seats. It was restful and relaxing, but we were getting nowhere.
Each day I walked the five miles into town to find out how the work on our transport was progressing. It wasn't. Several, indeed many, ingenious theories were put into practice-including a half-hearted attempt to weld the casing-which of course proved a dismal failure. But no one could say the Page emporium did not try. It was a repetition of the old story: the broken rear hub was impossible to repair.

Therefore the next move was a cable to Sydney, to our old friend Jack Crawford: 'Send air express complete new rear end unit for Prima.' Somehow the message became garbled over the two thousand-odd miles, for the reply which came three days later said, in effect, 'What did you say?' I controlled my exasperation and we tried again.

All this procedure of course consumed the days alarmingly, and there was the question of our fast-dwindling cash. I scrutinized the local paper for casual work but Townsville, like the rest of Australia, was feeling the beginning of the 'slight recession'. There was precious little demand for labour, except on the railways, whose yearly losses would not be greatly affected by the employment of casual porters. I blessed the State-run White Elephant, and for the next week pushed a trolley up and down a long platform in company with about fifty other men. Sometimes we really did work, unloading vans full of foodstuff and supplies from the south. At other times, when things were slack (more often than not), we trundled slowly from the train to the loading bay carrying nothing more bulky than one packet of soap-flakes, or a small roll of magazines. No one laughed, or thought it ludicrous. So long as there was activity, all was well.

I stuck this for a week. Never have hours dragged so wearily. The eight-hour day stretched into eternity and by the evening I was exhausted playing at this mockery of labour. We had reached the stage, however, when there was a real necessity for another working spell.

Nita tried very hard to find a job in the town, but most of the businesses were family concerns and tightly sewed up so far as staff were concerned. The only vacancies were for barmaids (experienced) to man the innumerable pubs which the town boasted.

We hadn't budgeted for another breakdown and the purse now held only twenty-five pounds. Jack Crawford had finally got the gist of our
telegraphic message and replied with the depressing news that he was clean out of stock and had wired to Germany to get another unit flown out from the factory. It was going to be a long business.

There was a young married couple who stayed for two nights in the caravan park. They towed their van with an Austin A.go and converted it during the working day into a gown shop. Their customers were the shop-starved women of the outback stations, who apparently fell hungrily on them wherever they went. They had been in the far north for two months and Ron (the husband) painted a glowing picture of Mount Isa, the mining boom town in central Queensland. It was as hot as hell, a mushroom town of choking dust and a shifting population, but it was rich in lead and copper and labour was wanted. If we could put up with the dust and discomfort, we could save a tidy nest-egg in a short time.

As far south as Brisbane we had heard whispers of the fabulous Mount Isa, where the lead bonus was as high as fifteen pounds a week, in addition to the regular wages; where the pub customers never asked for change, and where a man could save a thousand pounds in a startlingly short time. This latest first-hand account, coupled with Nita's inability to find a job (and my own time being wasted with a porter's barrow), decided our next move. We returned the sidecar to Page's, packed a few essentials into the valise, and with an arrangement that the scooter would be sent on by rail when it was mobile again, paid the railway ten of our precious notes and boarded the train to make the two days and nights' trek inland to Mount Isa.

Rapidly the fertile coastal belt fell away behind us and the tiny engine, pulling the three carriages, settled down to the six-hundred-mile journey westwards, towards the parched interior. Nita and I had the carriage to ourselves and we pulled down the sun-blinds to keep out the worst of the blazing sun, relaxed on our respective seats, crossed our fingers, and hoped our decision had been a wise one. We had ten pounds left and would know not a soul at our destination.

Up to this time, all our travel in Australia had been confined to the coastal belt, spacious country true enough, but a land of trees and rainfall with the waters of the sea never far distant. Now, along the twin ribbons of glittering steel rails, we chugged in a straight line over vast, uninhabited plains and prairies towards the centre of the continent-the 'Dead Heart'.

The air became noticeably drier and a hot wind fanned through the little steel train until we found ourselves almost gasping for air. I supposed we would become acclimatized in a few days. I filled the glass water bottle which the railway supplied at one of the little whistle-stops—a spark of humanity in the middle of a seemingly dead planet. The sky was no longer blue, but brassy, metallic, reflecting the scorched straw colour of the flat world on every side.

Mile after mile the landscape remained unaltered. Spinifex and mulga, stunted grey-green clumps that grew no higher than a man's knee. A tree was an event. We came to regard our little carriage as a haven from a hostile world. It was comforting to look round the man-made box which moved on through a sea of parched desolation. The temperature rose steadily as we ploughed on through the second hot night, and as we tried to sleep away the second period of darkness in the cramped carriage I hoped desperately that St. Nicholas was going to smile on us on the morrow. This time we had really burned our boats.

On the strength of a few rumours and glamourized hearsay we had started on what could easily be a wild-goose chase, transport-less and with only ten pounds in our pockets. There was one bright spot in this somewhat doubtful business, we should be at least six hundred miles nearer to our aborigines. I told Nita this, but at that moment she wasn't very enthusiastic.

It was a blistering Saturday morning when the train pulled up the last gradient between the scorched sandstone hills and rattled along the straight into the railhead and township of Mount Isa. Through the dust-coated windows we could see rows of hastily erected bungalows: most of them looked sun-baked and temporary. There were a few more permanent buildings, but for the most part the place generated a pioneering atmosphere, with big pay packets as the sole reason for its existence.
The Going gets Tougher (Chapter 11 - Mount Isa)

On the station itself, which was merely a space cleared at the side of the line, with a dilapidated wooden building serving as station offices, were a few men strolling about, dressed mainly in shorts and sandals. It transpired that they were the town's shopkeepers, waiting for the train which was bringing the next week's supply of goods, from foodstuff to newspapers.

Nita and I jumped down to the dusty ground, hauled our gear after us, and made our way to the shade of the station. Our bank balance suddenly seemed very small and I was bent on immediate action in order to remedy our sad financial state. While Nita guarded the baggage I set off to walk to the mine offices, which lay near the railway, just a stone's throw from the enormous, glittering silver chimney which belched smoke night and day and was the trade-mark and landmark of Mount Isa.

'Ever worked in a mine before, mate?' asked the bush-shirted clerk behind a tall counter.

I had to say no, but I volunteered the information that I would no doubt be a valuable asset to any mechanical device which might lie within the mine. (How I envied that clerk his safe job behind the counter, with his wages assured and his peace of mind untouched by worries such as mine!) At that moment I wanted to be employed more than anything else in the world. I swore a mental oath to work like a slave if I found a job, and not to stir an inch this time until we had plenty of money to complete our travels in comparative comfort.

'Well, I'm sorry mate, but there's nothing just at the moment.

Leave your name and address with me and if there's a vacancy within the next week or two, I'll let you know.'

'The next week or two!' I hid my disappointment and said to the young man who seemed genuinely sorry about it, 'Do you know that ever since we landed in Australia, from Adelaide to Brisbane, we've heard the most glowing reports about this place-about the mine crying out for men and paying them enormous wages? In fact the place is legendary everywhere but here.'

'Well, it was, a couple of years ago,' replied the man with the job, 'but
things have gotten tougher in the last twelve months or so. As a matter of fact we've been laying men off this last few weeks. The demand for lead and copper has fallen in the world markets apparently, and of course it has affected us here with a vengeance. Even the lead bonus is down to ten pounds a fortnight.'

'What was it before?' I asked morosely.

'Fifteen a fortnight, cobber, on top of wages and all the overtime. You should have been here a year or so back,' his face grew very wistful. 'Still, even today it's not a bad little number if you can get on it. Anyway, I'll let you know if an opening crops up.' That was the death knell of any aspirations I might have had regarding Mount Isa Mine.

Back at the station, Nita greeted me with a prophetic 'They don't want you?' I nodded, crestfallen, but thinking hard about the next move.

'While you were over there, I've been talking to a porter,' said my wife. 'He thinks there might be an opening for a shunter right here on the railway.'

'What's the good of that?' I grumbled hopelessly. 'I don't know the back of a train from the front. Only those three days of barrow-pushing on Townsville station.'

My wife said nothing, and merely glanced at the sun-peeled brown door marked Stationmaster. I shrugged, and ambled towards it. There was nothing to lose. . . .

'Course, it's fortunate you've worked on the Queensland Railway before, even if it was only for three days,' said the tall, grizzled man with the Sherlock Holmes pipe. 'It'll make things much easier. I'll send a wire today and with any luck we'll get a reply back tomorrow and you can start Monday.' I nodded eagerly and tried desperately to look like an ace shunter.

'Did you have a medical in Townsville'

'Yes.'

'Pass O.K.?'
'Yes.'

'Right, then it's just a matter of confirmation really. You'll get three days' training, then we'll put you on one of the shifts. It's hard work but lively. You'll soon get used to it.'

I walked out of the cool office into the hard sunlight. As I started back along the dusty platform, the porter who had been talking to Nita stopped me.

'Did you get it?'

'Yes,' I said, 'the old boy must have been in a generous mood.'

'Generous mood, nothing. He's been trying to get a shunter for the past two months but none of the other blokes'll take it on. Your predecessor was killed on the job just up by the water tower there; slipped on a beer bottle and went straight under the engine. But you'll be all right so long as you don't try groggin' and shunting at the same time.' He lit a cigarette and strolled off towards the town. 'See yer later.'

Well, the tide of misfortune was starting to recede. So the job was risky? But so is living. The next move was to find some sort of living quarters. There was a camping ground about three miles from the town, and a good-hearted chap offered to give us and our gear a lift to the spot. We loaded up the boot of his car and in two minutes were heading away from the station down the narrow strip of bitumen towards the town and the camping ground. It was just noon when we completed the half-mile from the railway and swept into the main street of the township.

The shifting population of any boom town work hard and play hard. Mount Isa was no exception. After a five-day week, Saturday mornings (and mainly the rest of the day) were devoted to shaking off the working atmosphere of the week. And the people did it in style.

The most dominant buildings in the small community were the pubs, three of them. Gargantuan premises with bars almost fifty yards long and all packed to capacity. The hubbub which burst from this beer-dispensing trio
came literally in a roar. I had never heard anything like it; nor, I think, has any English publican for a good many years.

The main street was thronged with strollers, most of them men, with only a sprinkling of women. The shopfronts were gay and brightly painted, with the usual canopies offering shade, although in Mount Isa the rear of the business premises jutted directly into the bush. In the hundred yards of main street there were a lot of new cars, chiefly American, and a brand-new Holden was being raffled in front of Boyd's Hotel, the crowd buying tickets at a pound each.

The population of Mount Isa must be among the most cosmopolitan in the world. There were aborigines, dinkum Aussies, Swedes, Germans, Italians, Dutchmen, even Chinese, all chattering in quaint, polyglot English. The temperature was around the hundred mark and a huge dust pall, raised by the cars, hung like a fog above our heads. Half a mile away, the great silver chimney plumed its smoke into the brassy sky, evidence of the Saturday shift toiling five hundred feet below the surface of this, the true Australian bush.

The camping ground was just a dust bowl. So thick was the choking powder that I had to dig down almost a foot before I could find ground firm enough to take our tent pegs. There was not a blade of grass left in this square half-mile of ground, which had deteriorated into a kind of humpy town. There were all manner of makeshift living quarters: huts built of kerosene cans, a few caravans, tents, and many huts-cum-tents-half corrugated-iron, half canvas structures in which some hundreds of people were living.

Accommodation was at a premium in Mount Isa, but still the roving population poured in, most of them emigrants from southern Europe. We had pitched camp in the 'initiation ground' as it were. When the newcomer found his feet and progressed a little, he graduated from the dust bowl to something better. I was determined to move out with all haste from this baking, shadeless shanty town.

We placed our things inside the tent, fastened the flaps and set off straight away back along the dusty road to the township. While Nita bought a few items of food (at astounding prices, of course, everything having to be freighted overland from the south), I barged my way through the bar
crowds of Boyd's Hotel and nailed Mr Boyd himself, who was pulling beer at a very fast rate.

'Mr Boyd,' I roared, trying desperately to catch his eyes between a check-shirted shoulder and a Stetson.

'Hullo?'

'Do you want a good barmaid? Inexperienced, but intelligent and very quick?' I watched the sweat trickling off the end of his nose as he continued pulling the beer without looking up.

'No.'

'Thanks,' I said, 'I just wondered.' I began to back out between the glasses.

'Can she cook?'

I was back in a flash and leaning over the bar with all the temptation I could muster.

'She can cook anything. She specializes in Continental dishes and she. . .' '

'Don't want any o' that foreign muck. Jus' good plain English cooking. Roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, plum duff, that sort o' thing.'

'She's marvellous with English cooking and she. . .' '

'Bring her round tonight. Eight o'clock. Can't stop now.' 'Right, Mr Boyd, eight o'clock it is. And I'll have a beer. . . .' '

Nita got the job, starting at six o'clock on the following morning, Sunday, so our jubilation for the rest of that Saturday evening can well be imagined. We were really riding the crest and I decided to push our luck to the nth degree. 'Let's punt round and find some quarters,' I said. 'The lodging position sounds very black, but you never know.'

Nita was game, so we started. We stopped people in the street and asked at the tiny police station and the newly erected fire station: did they know anyone at all who would let a room for a few months? Apparently they
didn't. But we kept trying. The pubs had no rooms left at all. We tackled the barmen and people whom the barmen told us to tackle. And somehow nothing could subdue us that evening. I asked an old man who was sitting on a veranda in a cloud of mosquitoes:

'You wouldn't like to let a room for a few months, would you, Pop?'

'Nope. Got three Eyetalians here now.'

'Thanks, anyway.'

'Try Bert Hodges, next bungalow along. He might know something.'

We made our way over the rocky, corrugated track, across a hundred yards of no-man's-land, till we reached the next bungalow. A neon sign was hanging from the porch-'Store'. Bert Hodges was a huge, blond Bavarian with an English vocabulary comprising about two words. He was packed to capacity (everyone let rooms) but his friend Mr Kristoff might be able to help.

Mr Kristoff could help. Regardless of the late hour he was hammering and banging, fitting window panes in a new chalet which he was erecting on his acre of ground. (The noise he was making did not matter in the least, for no one seemed to go to bed in Mount Isa on Saturday nights.) There were already six wooden bungalows in the compound, and lights twinkled in most of them.

Mr Kristoff was another giant of a fellow with a dark, swarthy complexion and a mouthful of steel teeth. His English was on a par with Bert Hodges', but the words he spoke were the right ones.

The chalet would be completed in three days' time and we could move in at eight pounds a fortnight; which was dirt cheap for Mount Isa, even though it was a one-roomed chalet with only two beds and a table.

To Nita and me it was the Dorchester. We paid friend Kristoff four pounds on account and returned, footsore and tired but in the highest of spirits, to our patch of dust in Shanty Town. Our Month of Misery was over.
Mount Isa to Darwin (Chapter 12 - Mount Isa and onward)

On the Monday morning I started with the Queensland Railway as Trainee Shunter, and after three days was pronounced fully fledged and put on to shift work.

At the end of ten days I was just beginning to grasp what it was all about. And that first fortnight was the toughest I had ever experienced. For eight hours a day I ran like a scalded cat up and down those dust-choked marshalling yards chasing runaway F wagons, switching Kangaroo points, clinging desperately to a speeding engine as we whooshed round 'the balloon', making up 'strings of hoppers', frantically swapping 'D links' and generally trying to follow, in a dazed, sweat-soaked manner, the mysterious and utterly bewildering 'railway game'.

By the end of the first month I became reasonably efficient. That is, I could jump on or off the speeding engine with a sure foot; I could wrestle with the handbrake on a runaway fly-shunted wagon full of copper ingots from the mine, and apply the wretched thing before the truck smashed into the back of a made-up train; I could jump off the engine and race the iron brute to the points and switch them before the twenty tons of metal thundered past. And I mastered the delicate art of 'catching on'.

In England, I believe, the shunter uses a long pole to 'catch on'. This is simply the operation of linking a stationary wagon to a moving one. In Queensland they scorn all mechanical aids for this process, preferring to do it by hand. I sweated a good deal before I perfected the operation-and it wasn't all from exertion.

The method is to lean the body across the buffer of the stationary wagon, catch hold of the steel link (which weighs about half a hundredweight) and start the thing moving, pendulum fashion. The engine fly-shunts the next wagon and this free-running monster comes charging down the track towards the standing wagon.

The object is to swing the link and drop it on the spike of the approaching wagon at the precise moment when the impact compresses the two buffers close enough for the link to stretch over both hooks. If the chance is missed, the stationary wagon goes hurtling down the line, a lot of time is lost, and the engine driver gives vent to his annoyance in no uncertain terms. So, if possible, one does not miss. But it takes a day or two before
one can overcome the almost irresistible urge to jump clear at the last moment, for if the buffer were to break while the body was stretched across. . . But one thinks only of making a clean connection.

The shunters are the elite of the rail yards. We (after a month I passed my unofficial test with the rest of the team) worked a shorter shift than anyone else, for it was undoubtedly a most strenuous job, holding a strong element of danger and requiring quickness of hand and eye and the agility of an acrobat. Our trade-mark was the horsehide gloves with which we 'caught on', and when the shift was over we would walk into the porter's office, proud of our grease-blackened forearms and wringing wet shirts which clung damply to our backs. We were paid sixpence an hour more than the rest.

While I helped make up the long trains of copper ingots which left Mount Isa every day, Nita was tackling the equally strenuous if not harder job of cooking for the hungry patrons at Boyd's Hotel. She started at six in the morning, finished at two p.m., then went back at four o'clock until eight in the evening. Here was no genteel dainty cooking for a select few, for it meant preparing huge steaks, joints, and gigantic puddings for ravenous Queenslanders who (despite the climate) liked their roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. She cooked on a colossal scale in kitchens equipped with six huge coke-burning ovens. Add the heat of these to the outside temperature of a hundred in the shade and it gives some idea of the stamina required. Although only five feet two of slender femininity, my wife is strong and tenacious. She must be, for I could barely stand the tremendous heat of those kitchens for the five minutes' wait each evening when her day was over.

We saw very little of each other during the next three months. When we did, it was to smile a weary greeting and collapse on to our beds to sleep like the dead before starting the next stint. We worked every day of each week, Sundays included, accepted all the overtime that came our way, and rarely was our working day shorter than eleven hours. We spent nothing, other than the chalet bill. Nita ate her free meals at the hotel, but missed one in three (two meals a day being ample in that climate) and gave it to me; it was more than enough to keep me going for the following twenty-four hours. And our money mounted.

At the end of the third month I had my boots soled and heeled for the third
time, and Nita washed her apron for the hundredth. We took stock of our position. We were both very fit, a bit on the lean side perhaps, but healthily skinny; our purse was now bulging with two hundred pounds and our feet were feeling itchy with the call of the north again. After three months, however, there was still no scooter.

So another battle to regain possession of our transport began. Telegrams to Townsville, Sydney, Germany. Negative replies and excuses came back in quick time. The variety of reasons which were advanced for our not having the Prima after a three months' wait were quite astonishing. So we battled through the medium of the Post Office, worked like Trojans at our jobs, and waited.

With the coming of July, winter came to Mount Isa and we found it necessary to wear pullovers during the early morning. On one never-to-be-forgotten Saturday it rained. The heavens opened and in two minutes the whole area was flooded. With no provision against cold (a fireplace being a rarity) everyone went to bed and lay huddled and miserable under blankets during the two-day deluge. Nita and I loved it. We took our sleeping-bags out of the valise and lay with our faces in the crisp, strange night air, for once able to gaze at the dark sky through the open window without having it filtered by a mosquito-net.

So to the beginning of August, and one magic morning our scooter reappeared. The rear end positively gleamed with new parts. The last lap to Darwin was going to be a piece of cake.

The arrival of the Prima completely upset our routine. After four months in Mount Isa it was extremely difficult to reconcile ourselves to the fact that we were on an expedition. I almost felt we had grown up with the place. Also the joint wages we were getting made us reluctant to put an end to our security. But the lure of the road soon outweighed the monetary advantages. We spent a week overhauling our gear, getting in supplies to take with us, and handing in our respective notices. Then, with the comforting sum of two hundred and fifty pounds in Nita's purse, we said our goodbyes to all the friends we had made and started for the Northern Territory.

We had traversed six hundred miles of the bush by train, now there lay ahead a thousand-odd miles to Darwin to be tackled under our own steam.
It is not until one travels leisurely in the north of Australia that one realizes the immense loneliness of the bush. We now faced hundreds of miles across spinifex and mulga country, relieved here and there by the odd ghost gum and tiny outback settlements. Looking at the map, the places named give the impression of townships or at least hamlets. But most of these names symbolize nothing more than a spring of water pumped by a windmill, a stack of petrol drums for the odd traveller, and a general store carrying everything from harnesses to Coca-Cola.

On the outskirts of Mount Isa there was a rickety signpost pointing a weather-beaten finger towards Camoweal, 100 miles. The black strip of bitumen, glistening under the fierce sun, stretched straight as a die into infinity. Early one Sunday morning, we swept past the signpost for the last time. I had passed it every day on my way to work and I often used to think what a glorious moment it would be when the beckoning finger was behind us for the last time. When it actually came, however, the moment fell rather flat; we were leaving behind some good friends and an excellent joint income. The tall, silver stack of the mine chimney was belching smoke exactly as it had done on the morning of our arrival: Mount Isa may have had a shifting population, but there was never a break in the extracting of the precious metals from the bowels of the earth. We settled down to cover the hundred barren miles to Camoweal.
From Frewena we travelled under a baking sun due west until eventually we came to the road junction of the Alice Springs-Darwin road. The junction was marked with an impressive stone tribute to that great humanitarian of the territory, the Flying Doctor, or Flynn of the Inland.

His work has laid the foundations of a life-saving system that reaches even the remotest outback stations. With time concertina'd by radio and aircraft, no one any longer dies for lack of rapid medical attention.

The monument cast a finger of precious shade and Nita and I relaxed in the relatively cool patch until the sting went out of the sun. Then the scooter's nose was turned north, to start on the last six hundred and fifty miles to 'The Gateway of Australia'.

Six hundred and fifty miles: a distance similar to that between Land's End and John o' Groats, with but one fair-sized township two hundred or so miles from Darwin itself, Katherine.

It took us a week to reach the capital. A week of sun-bleached, arid country
as wide as the sky itself. One might think that such terrain-sliced through with a bitumen strip—would be boring to drive across; on the contrary, for us it was a week of excitement.

First there were the aborigines—our first glimpse, in their own land, of the people we had travelled so far to see. It was, in fact, quite a shock to see in the grey dawn light four dusky figures squatting on their haunches about fifty yards off, regarding us silently and steadily.

There were three men, wearing only loin-cloths, and a woman swathed in a Mother Hubbard. The men carried long hunting spears, while the woman was hugging a bark basket which, from the way she held it, probably contained a baby. I was so excited that I forgot the timid nature of these wild people and instead of playing it slowly I jumped up, reaching for my camera as I did so. I hailed them with what I hoped was a very cheerful greeting and started towards them. It was too much for the shy nomads. They rose and started to walk quickly away through the bush. I hastened after them, cursing their shyness and not, at that moment, blaming myself for being a clumsy idiot.

'Don't run away,' I pleaded in a loud voice. It must have sounded like a threat, for they broke into a loping run and simply melted into the mulga. I retraced my steps slowly back to the camp, crestfallen and very disappointed. One does not come across aborigine hunting parties in the vicinity of the main road every day. However, I had learnt a lesson and next time would spend all day if necessary in making the initial approaches.

Then there were the bush fires: vast areas, charred and blackened, right up to the edge of the road, the air full of smuts and the heavy, acrid smell of burning assailing the nostrils. Frequently it was necessary to run the gauntlet through a veritable sea of smoke and flames. At one point the heat had melted the bitumen into a sticky, slippery mess, and we all but skidded off down a precipitous slope.

Those fires were most eerie at night. We did a lot of after-dark driving, as the scooter engine preferred the night air. Sometimes the whole horizon was flickering and dancing with flames, with an occasional vivid flash of light as another resinous gum tree exploded with the intense heat. One night we drove through several herds of kangaroo and a swarm of snakes
fleeing the all-consuming flames. During the day squadrons of hawks hovered over the ever-shifting boundary of fire, swooping continually on small game that rushed panic-stricken from cover, escaping one fate only to rush into the waiting jaws of another.

And there were always the derelict, abandoned vehicles which told their mute story of disaster. Most of the assortment of trucks and cars we passed had rusted and settled down to blend, not unharmoniously, with the background, but a few were more recent victims of the relentless bush and we even came across one Holden sedan—not more than two years old—complete down to the last nut and bolt; there was still enough life in the battery to turn the engine over. But who would tow such a cripple (the front offside wheel hanging crazily from impact with a tree) three hundred miles to the nearest repair shop? I drove extremely cautiously on that marathon ride to Darwin.

For us there was always the infinite pleasure of night in the bush, when our own small fire crackled merrily and the smell of brewing tea mingled with the roasting gum leaves, creating a delightful and unforgettable aroma. Nights of clear air, crisp and invigorating after the heat of the day, when the cicadas shrilled a steady, lulling whirr and a million stars twinkled seemingly just above our heads. These were periods in our lives that were savoured at the time and became, in retrospect, priceless memories.

One stifling Saturday afternoon (humid and sticky, for we had now reached the coast), we passed the last of the hastily erected and now overgrown wartime landing strips, driving through the last avenue of dark green, fetid mangrove trees, to arrive safely at our base for the aborigine expedition. The capital of the Northern Territory was drowsy, somnolent, gasping in one hundred and ten degrees. I hoped the authorities would not be too sleepy to attend to us and our needs.
Mount Isa to Darwin (Chapter 12 - To Frewena)

There must be few areas in the world where one can drive along a good-surfaced road all day long without meeting anyone. In fact, I cannot remember ever having done so. One expects and, indeed, provides for lonely travel over bush tracks, but to have a perfectly good tarmacadam road stretching for hundreds of miles all to oneself is rather disconcerting. And that is how it was for hour after hour. No sign of another human being; no sound (save that of the buzz of the scooter), and no habitation. A hundred miles of scorched Australian bush; the only evidence of man to disturb the tranquillity of this 'Dead Heart' country being the black ribbon of the War Road.

Suddenly, just before dusk, we were in Camoweal. A dip in the barren hills, up over a rise and there it was—a row of low, sprawling, wooden shacks on either side of a main street which must have been nearly a hundred yards wide. The line of shacks continued for a quarter of a mile, then ended abruptly as the bush began once again. There was not a soul to be seen in this township—the last in Queensland—it was almost a ghost town. There were one or two small signs of life. A prowling dog, a flock of bleating goats, but of humanity, nothing. We drove through the 'High Street' and pitched camp at the far end adjacent to the town's water supply which ran in a thin trickle along the near-dry bed of a creek. Save for silent, deserted-looking shacks behind us, we might almost have been in virgin country.

Just before dark, the night of solitude to which we had resigned ourselves was broken by the approach of a travel-stained and somewhat battered Hillman Minx. The occupants (a couple of men) looked hard at our unorthodox transport as they passed, stopped a little way up the road—apparently deciding to investigate further—reversed and came back. We had company for the night.

Ross and Harry (no one bothers with surnames in the bush) were travelling the outback, selling lingerie to the station housewives. They were doing very well, too, with their latest 'Paris creations', which apparently proved irresistible to women who spent most of their lives in jeans and check shirts. These brawny characters, lustily pulling up tree roots to feed the camp-fire, resembled lumberjacks rather than underwear specialists. Harry, bouncing and effervescent, whirled about performing a one-man mannequin show, looking utterly incongruous as he held a scarlet dress in
front of his bearded face and hid his own clothing of dust-covered khaki bush-shirt and shorts.

Ross, the quieter of the two, just sat, smiling faintly, while Nita and I laughed uproariously at the burlesque. Ross had obviously seen the display many times before. I should imagine that Harry was an extremely good salesman, being one of those unpredictable people who go through life fully wound, and to whom even a moment of tranquillity is a torment.

After an excellent meal, in which we pooled our respective larders and came up with barbecued steaks, Harry kept us amused eating old razor blades, doing a variety of conjuring tricks, and in the interim acting as a most energetic stoker. Our modest campfire reached enormous proportions and would have done credit to any November Fifth. Harry was still working feverishly—and probably unnecessarily—on the underside of the Hillman when the rest of us, rolled in our sleeping-bags, could not keep our eyes open a moment longer.

I awoke early the next morning to the accompaniment of a frightened chorus of goat bleats, and I raised my head in time to see Harry haring past about a hundred yards off in hot pursuit of a nanny-goat, with a mug in one hand and clutching his shorts in the other. The pair disappeared in the long spinifex and I knew we would have fresh milk for breakfast.

At seven o'clock, with breakfast eaten and goodbyes said, we found ourselves alone again with the bush and the wide blue sky. Two hundred miles to the next dot of habitation, Frewena.

Later that same morning we crossed the border beneath a rusty bullet-riddled signboard. At last we were in the Northern Territory.

Ahead, straw-coloured plains of waving spinifex, devoid of all visible life, heralded our entry into the northernmost state of the vast Australian continent. The country was desolate, parched, almost painfully silent. But it wasn't unfriendly. The tarmac thread gave us a sense of security. It was impossible to lose our way, so we were able to enjoy the experience of driving across the wilderness without actually being in contact with it. Nita felt it was a civilized way of crossing an uncivilized terrain.

For all that, though, the last lap to Darwin was no joy-ride. The heat
became intense as the miles mounted and the sparking-plug demanded attention every twenty miles or so. The front tyre, too, was wearing very rapidly since the addition of the sidecar, and I began to be afraid that it would not last the distance.

Hot, dust-covered, and parched, we reached Frewena at sundown. It was one solitary shack at the side of the road.

Frewena was run by a bearded giant named Arthur. Laconic, with a dry sense of humour, he blended beautifully with the immense surroundings. Clad only in shorts and sandals, he ambled out from the cool veranda to inspect the latest arrival at his staging post. In no hurry to open the conversation, he stood about three paces off and surveyed us and our diminutive outfit, rolling a cigarette unhurriedly and taking us in with a steady glance.

'Good day,' I said.

He nodded.

'I'd like to get hold of a loaf if you can spare it,' I said.

'Clean out of bread, sport. But you'll more'n likely get some at the store.' He broke his silence with seeming reluctance.

'Good,' I said, 'and where's the store?' I glanced round at the uninterrupted horizon on every side.

'Aw, she's about a hundred miles up the road.'

Nita and I looked at each other blankly.

'Let you have some flour for damper though, if you like.' We heaved a sigh of relief and eased our aching bodies from the machine.

'We'll take the flour and a couple of iced beers,' said Nita, parched of throat and momentarily casting economy to the winds. I did nothing to dissuade her from indulging in such luxury. Bottles of iced beer in the middle of the Northern Territory are almost impossible to resist.
While we sat luxuriating in the cool store-cum-rest-house, with the glasses in our hands, the storekeeper thawed rapidly.

'Name's Arthur. You gonna stop here the night?'

I said that two hundred miles in one day had been enough for us.

'By God,' said Arthur with feeling, 'I reckon you're a couple of heroes.'

We were stiff, certainly, but not unduly so. We had certainly become tougher since those far-off days in France and Germany, when sixty miles per day was an absolute maximum.

'We think you're something of a hero yourself,' said I. 'Don't you get desperately lonely here at times?'

'Sometimes,' replied our host. 'But when I find myself talking too much to the dog or that pet galah of mine, then I take a run into Tennant Creek to sort of rehabilitate myself. After a few days among those beer-swillin' friends of mine, I'm glad to get back for a rest. 'Course, it's pretty lonely when the wet sets in further up north, then the road's pretty well deserted and I don't see a soul for weeks on end. Gets pretty boring then.'

'But you wouldn't swop places, for all that?'

'Nope.'

We set up camp about a hundred yards from the shack and after eating a very good supper (considering our breadless condition) just spread the sleeping-bags and slept like logs until sunrise.
The Aborigines of Snake Bay (Chapter 13 – Darwin)
Darwin has the reputation of being the fastest-growing city in Australia. Where, around a natural seaport in the sweltering tropics, barely a decade ago there was nothing but a few tin shacks and a motley, fluctuating population, there is now a thriving, modern city, together with an airport comparable to any in the whole continent. It is a brightly coloured, exotic community of cosmopolitan beings, pleasantly secure in the knowledge that their home is the Government administrative headquarters of the Northern Territory, virtually run by far-off Canberra.

The city is small enough to be intimate and cosy-only a city by outback standards, something like, say, Blandford in Dorset but large enough to boast some very attractive clusters of stilted bungalows of ultra-modern design, a couple of cinemas, a beautifully kept tropical garden, and a whole army of Government officials. There is already a firmly established 'Nobs' Hill', radiating an almost American atmosphere. Among the crowds of uniformed officials, looking neatly businesslike in their white shirts and navy blue shorts and immaculate white socks, the rest of the population stroll about at a pace in keeping with the climate. I believe on our first drive up the main street we saw, without undue effort, practically every nationality of the globe, from Chinese and Slavs to Sicilians and half -caste aborigines.

By a tremendous stroke of luck the first person to whom we spoke turned out to hold the key to our quest for aborigines. As always, on arriving at a new town, we were pottering slowly along, surveying our surroundings, sniffing up the atmosphere, and marvelling at the sight of the Timor Sea which shimmered, almost a cobalt blue, beyond the wide palm-lined avenue. It was good to see a coastline again.

There were some very plush residences along that marine drive, and busily painting the fence of one palatial bungalow was a man of medium build and age, dressed in ragged shorts, who was, I think, only too glad to pause in his labours and watch the approach of our strange-looking outfit. Thus, by the slenderest chance, we met Doug Lockwood, chief reporter in Darwin for the Melbourne Daily Herald, who had only just returned from London after being specially flown over to receive first prize for the London Evening News competition for 'The World's Strangest Story' (a fantastic but true tale of Bas Wie, an island native who had made an incredible illegal entry into Australia after the war -we were to hear all
about Bas Wie later that evening). He smiled cheerfully as we approached, and we stopped to ask where the administrative headquarters were. And so an invaluable friendship was formed.

Doug Lockwood was one of the very few men in the capital of the Northern Territory who could guide us along the narrow and rocky path of officialdom to our objective—Melville Island. That the people of the island occupied such an isolated wilderness was due almost entirely to the Australian Government Department of Native Affairs, which exercised a justifiably rigid control over all European visitors, allowing only a few entries, and then not without a stiff medical test. For the Snake Bay aborigines are highly susceptible—usually with fatal results—to common ailments of the civilized white which inconvenience us for no more than a few days.

So, on that balmy, tropical evening, as we sat under a swishing fan and admired the primitive wall decorations in his cool, spacious bungalow, Doug outlined a plan for Nita and me to follow.

First, we would have to go to the Native Affairs Department and get permission to visit the island. This, Doug thought, should not be too difficult as we were writing and film-making. Then we would have to undergo the medical, equip ourselves with supplies, and lastly find some method of crossing the shark-infested stretch of Timor Sea which separated us from our goal.

Unfortunately the man we had to see was in Canberra and would not be back for a week. We would just have to wait.

Not wishing to encroach too much on Lockwood's hospitality, we declined his 'open house' offer and set up camp on a beautiful stretch of green sward that overlooked the bay. That this particular piece of springy turf was also the pitch of Darwin's cricket club was immaterial; they were not using it, so we could; which was typical of the big-heartedness of Northern Australia. No one objected to our using the changing rooms and showers, either. Indeed, the attendant encouraged us to do so and left all the doors unlocked. We waited six days for the return of the administrator, in complete comfort.

During those six days, the hours simply weren't long enough. We explored
Darwin from end to end, became regular visitors to the Native Affairs Department, met and made friends with two Latvian crocodile hunters (robust, heavily built characters who had just returned after six months in the bush of Cape York Peninsula and who were enjoying civilization again on the £1,000 profit from the sale of skins), had the scooter and sidecar overhauled and a stronger spring fitted to the third wheel-ready for the marathon trip south some time in the hazy future—and lastly, we met Jack Kelley.

On the fourth day of our stay there was great excitement in the township. The Mobilgas 'Round Australia Rally' was coming through in the evening. We spent the afternoon getting in necessary supplies—optimistically perhaps—for the forthcoming expedition, and after the standard Australian main meal of steak and eggs, we fastened the tent flap and strolled across the cricket pitch; past the luxurious, brand-new Darwin Hotel (two-roomed suite: £20 per day) to a fenced enclosure already thronged with expectant watchers waiting to greet the first competitors in this, the world's most gruelling motor-sport event.

The first car, a Volkswagen, arrived dead on time smothered in bull-dust, the windscreen patterned with spattered insects, to disgorge two weary drivers, red-eyed and very, very tired. They checked in at the control, grinned at the crowd of cheering onlookers by dint of great effort, and left their vehicle impounded to snatch a few hours' sleep before the next lap.

During the following two hours the rest of the field arrived. Surprisingly, the majority of the cars were in good shape considering the terrain and the average speed set. Some of them were, of course, very sick mechanically, but the major cause of body damage appeared to be from collisions with kangaroos during the night drives. One such car, a Holden, sponsored by a southern departmental store, had the front offside door tied with string; a door only vaguely resembling its original shape. I was unable to understand why so many drivers could not avoid a glare-blinded animal, and it was not until we started on the return journey south that I discovered why.

A little later Nita and I found ourselves talking to one of the crew, a tall, sun-bronzed fellow of large physique and twinkling eyes, who, despite the world's toughest rally in which he now competed, seemed more interested in our own achievements on the scooter. And so we struck up a
spontaneous friendship which was strengthened the next morning, when the rested driver had slept off the worst of his fatigue. He knew of our plans and aspirations, and his parting shot as he left again on the next stage to Mount Isa was a good illustration of his warm, generous nature.

‘When you get back to Melbourne, come straight along,’ he yelled above the revving engines. 'I've got a caravan in the back yard. Built it myself. All mod. cons. It's yours for as long as you want to stay.' He handed me a slip of paper with his address hastily scrawled. 'Look forward to seein' you two in about four months' time. G'bye.'

And with a quick wave of the hand the timekeeper signalled, the rear wheels of the Holden span a moment in the dust, the car took off at full bore, went through the compound gates in a controlled slide and was in seconds just a speck at the far end of the palm-lined avenue. Well, whatever might befall us, we knew that if or when we got back to Melbourne we would be sure of a very warm welcome from Jack Kelley, master builder and sometime competitor in the toughest trial of all.
The Aborigines of Snake Bay (Chapter 13 – Snake Bay)
The little aircraft stood on the runway of Darwin Airport, coughing fitfully as the pilot warmed the engine against the cold morning air. Nita and I, carrying our one valise between us, crossed the tarmac strip and stood waiting (somewhat apprehensively, for the plane was shuddering violently and a mechanic was collecting a heap of tools from beneath the fuselage) for the Native Affairs officer. The pilot, a cheerful type (unfortunately looking only about fifteen years old) greeted us.

'Not a bad old tub,' he volunteered, interpreting Nita's worried glances. 'We call her Bleriot's Prototype. A bit of historic machinery that, but we should make it with a following wind. If we do get any trouble it won't be in the air, but trying to put it down on dirt strips. Never did like those jungle clearings to put down on. Last bloke over did a ground loop and finished up in the scrub; took a hundred natives three days to fish him out. Still, it is early morning. Gets real turbulent around midday when the temperature climbs a bit.'

The sun was already uncomfortably hot and we looked around for our travelling companion. To our relief he appeared on time and we boarded the flimsy aircraft and strapped ourselves in. The Administrator was paying a brief visit to the twin island of Bathurst and the Catholic Mission there. We would go on to Melville as guest passengers in his plane, where we would be deposited and left very much to our own devices for as long as we liked. If the ancient aeroplane held together, fortune was indeed smiling on us.

The little plane made a perfect crossing and an equally good landing on the Bathurst strip. It took off again and dropped down finally into the steamy jungle of Snake Bay with equal ease, and my wife and I heaved a sigh of relief, brushed the perspiration from our eyes, and were once again convinced that appearances can be very deceptive. Soon the hum of the aircraft grew fainter. We watched as it circled once and rapidly disappeared into the brazen sky; the roar of petrol engines was replaced by the buzz of insects and the weird, chiming call of the bell-bird. Beneath our feet was the scorched brown earth; on every side the thick emerald green of the jungle. We hitched up the valise and made our way to the warden's lonely bungalow which overlooked the tropical grandeur of Snake Bay, Melville Island.
Colin Townsend was a man who had forsaken the city for the bush. He strode out from the bungalow to meet us. From beneath a wide slouch hat, a keen, mahogany-coloured face grinned a greeting.

'Good day. Good trip over?'

'We have arrived, and that's as good as I want it,' I replied, relief evident in my voice.

Col laughed and introduced himself. 'I look after the running of the sawmill. Most of the boys go walk-about from time to time, but we still manage to ship a fair amount of timber to the mainland.'

'Sawmill!' we both ejaculated in amazement, gazing round at the seemingly virgin jungle. 'Do you mean to say that the aborigines work here for a living?' I asked.

Col laughed again. 'Oh, you needn't get anxious. Some of them hang around the administration building here and do the odd spot of labour; but then again a lot of 'em don't. Guess they're the ones you're after, eh?' We nodded.

Inside the bungalow, cool and comfortable, with the roar of the surf breaking only fifty yards away on the golden beach, our host elaborated.

'The Australian Government have a sound scheme, under the Native Welfare Department, whereby all these islanders can, if they wish, have a fair share of what our gracious modern living can offer: tucker, clothes, medical treatment, even wages. But of course it's the devil's own job to convince 'em that if they can have everything else for free, why should they have to labour for cash which they can't spend, anyway.'

'What do they do with the money, then?' asked Nita.

'Oh, they're usually saving up for something. Some of it goes as bride price, perhaps, or for the odd one or two who are ambitious, on a trip to Darwin. Or they swop it for tobacco, or buy bits and pieces from the store. And in return they work the sawmill.' All our visions of truly primitive people began to disappear.
Outside, a small knot of islanders had gathered to inspect the new arrivals; and on the surface they looked primitive enough. The men, with tall, well-built figures of glistening ebony, were dressed only in nagas (loin-cloths) and were all carrying long, twin-barbed fishing spears. The women, in Mother Hubbard gowns, clutched blackened billycans and equally black children with both hands. The only thing that marred the picture was a packet of Capstan cigarettes which protruded from the waistband of one hunter.

Col, following my gaze, explained. 'There are only one or two of 'em who can afford tailor-made cigarettes, and only then on pay day. They usually smoke Nikki-Nikki-trade tobacco-most of the time. Anyway, you might as well start your visit by having a look at the post. Don't suppose you'll want to spend too much time in the "civilized" part of the island.'

The 'sawmill' was something of a relief. Just a clearing in the bush with one circular saw under a corrugated-iron roof, driven by a mobile generator. The store was equally modest, and a hundred yards from the tiny settlement the rest of the island appeared just about as it had been since the beginning of time.

Next morning, the formalities completed, we set off, leaving the buildings behind us to search for a family of island nomads who were living their lives independent of the settlement. The authorities had presented to us for the next few weeks an ideal family to study; that of Wampiat-L-Miri (pidgin-English name, Black Joe), his wives and children and, of course, his dogs.

We found them about four miles away, camped with two or three other families in a natural amphitheatre, through the middle of which ran a crystal-clear stream. Smoke from the cooking fire curled in and cast a slight haze over the camp area. The whirlies, those merely temporary shelters built by nomadic aborigines, were all but invisible against the rest of the bush and jungle patches, being just discernible as dwellings by the limp leaves of the cut branches.

Reclining in the doorway of the biggest, most central whirlie, was Wampiat-L-Miri, tribal elder, battle-scarred and dignified, a full-blooded aboriginal. He was smoking a crab's-claw pipe with obvious relish, and across his knees was a half-finished spear of ornate carving. Our young
guide pointed at the lounging elder. 'Dat one fell a him Black Joe,' he announced. Then, with duty done, he turned about and set off back towards civilization and the tailor-made cigarettes which he obviously preferred.

Black Joe, we immediately discovered, was not cluttered with any chains of formality. He greeted us with 'Gibbit li'l bit 'bacco,' and held out the enormous crab's claw for replenishment. I had been forewarned and had brought two dozen tins of the precious weed with me. Nita found a tin and opened it; it was returned with a few strands in the bottom. Lesson one, never hand a tin of tobacco to an aboriginal.

The man who now puffed so contentedly watched us shrewdly from beneath craggy brows. Confident, without being arrogant, he basked in the comfortable security of his position, that of chief elder.

In the grass hut behind him, three wives sat crouched over a smoky cooking fire. Two were wizened crones who muttered to themselves, champing toothless jaws the while, while the third was a lithe girl of some nineteen years, already well initiated into motherhood with four chubby children to her credit. The youngest clung to her, pick-a-back fashion, watching our every movement with doubting, amber eyes. He was very near to tears during the first day after our arrival.

For that first week Nita and I did nothing more than camp a little way off from the cluster of whirlies and spend the days winning the confidence of the small tribe, and Black Joe in particular. It was this battle-scarred old warrior and his favourite wife (white-fella name, Fillissy) whose fortunes we wanted to follow in the humid jungle and thick bush of Snake Bay.

Gradually the barriers of suspicion were broken and we began to record camp life on film, without being stared out of countenance; and the army of dogs growled and bristled no longer. Indeed, having given scraps to one winsome pooch during the first days, we had great difficulty in eating at all without a vast canine audience, expectant and disconcerting, ringing our camp-fire among the gums.

One morning, Nita and I rose very early, at that time of transformation when the first grey streaks tinge the night sky—and tried to capture on film the fascinating sight of an aboriginal family awakening.
By the time we had the camera set up I could just get a reading on the exposure meter. A few yards away, Black Joe and his brood were still asleep and, despite the chill air, looked warm and cosy. In the middle of still warm fire ashes, Joe and Fillissy lay huddled back to back. Each had an arm protectively around a soundly sleeping baby. One of the children lay between its parents' legs and the other—the youngest—curled between their shoulder blades. To retain the warmth there were no fewer than five dogs forming a furry wall around the slumbering bunch of humanity. The family had, as always, started as a circle round the fire, gradually contracting as the flames died and the air became colder. They always finished up right in the ashes.

Joe awoke first, instantly alert, and grinned when he saw us with the camera turning, but averted his head almost immediately. My repeated requests 'not to look-im-in-eye one-fell a camera' had been well absorbed. Fillissy jumped up at the same moment. The piccaninnies and the dogs were the most reluctant risers, rolling instinctively towards the warm space vacated by the adults. Joe and his wife were, of course, smothered in wood ash, but they did nothing to disturb their coating of fine particles.

After taking a long draught of water from the nearby stream, Joe sauntered off, armed with his throwing stick, to look for breakfast. He returned an hour or so later with a fat goanna lizard about four feet long dangling limply from his shoulder. He might have stumbled on a 'possum, a snake (nearly all edible), any of a variety of birds, wild yams, or other succulent roots; all manner of fish in the hundreds of creeks that twisted away from the golden beaches; or, had he been very lucky, a wallaby, crouching in the thick bush of the higher level inland. Later we were to see Joe use his throwing stick. His accuracy was uncanny.

One might think that to wake in the morning, hungry, with nothing edible to hand would be a source of constant anxiety. But these primitive people know what vast resources are at their fingertips, so well are they versed in bush lore. They can, in fact, live very comfortably in country where a white man would have (and has) starved to death, with the nearby sounds of game mocking him from impenetrable green walls.

So the time passed and Nita and I became increasingly fascinated as we watched each day unfold for our primitive family. No longer were they camera conscious, or 'playing to the gallery'; we were accepted
completely—or so it seemed—by these children of Nature, and the ensuing
days gave us a vivid picture of the life of the world's earliest men.

Joe's command of the English tongue was very shaky, but that didn't matter
at all. I was more than content just to tag along with him on hunting
expeditions, or to watch him shaping throwing sticks or carving ironwood
spears outside his whirlie. He may have been slowing up a bit with the
years, but his old cunning and knowledge of the bush stood him in good
stead. If he got within striking distance of goanna or bandicoot, that animal
was as good as cooked—well, moderately cooked, for Joe's idea of a well-
roasted lizard was one that had been rested in hot ashes for about five
minutes. The resulting dinner was promptly eaten, skin, innards, hot ashes
and all.

Although these people are direct descendants from Stone Age Man, they
still have something to teach our modern world about harmonious living.
Their moral code is of the strictest, and they are true communists.
Everything is communal—game, implements, weapons, tobacco, clothing.
Their vocabulary does not include the word 'gratitude': no one is beholden
to another.

Even their peculiar marriage laws have sound reasoning for a basis. The
old men marry the young girls, and the youths marry the old women. They
are, of course, polygamous, but this custom is an ideal genetic
arrangement. It ensures that at least one half of the family is capable of
food gathering and that the tribal population is kept up to economic
strength. Three or four wives to each elder is not uncommon. Security for
all is assured.
The Aborigines of Snake Bay (Chapter 13 – Snake Bay Burial Corroboree)

During the beginning of the third week we awoke one morning to the sound of most dismal semi-musical cadences. Laurie One-Eye told us that it was his sister-widowed some time previously -trying to 'sing' her husband back to life. Laurie One-Eye intimated that the day was very near when the whole tribe would hold 'Pukamuni' (a burial corroboree) to bury the dead man and cast him out of their memories for ever. Since the poor fellow had died he had been mourned by his wife and a host of near and distant relatives. The 'Pukamuni' would send him finally and irrevocably to the land of his ancestors and his name would be taboo ever after.

As the day for the send-off corroboree drew nearer, excitement mounted in the camp and more time was devoted to celebration preparations, and Nita and I waited expectantly.

While Joe hunted in a desultory fashion, prior to the 'One-Bloody-Big-Fella Corroboree', his young wife Fillissy, carrying her baby piccaninny, fossicked among the steaming mangrove swamps for giant crabs and oysters. A rewarding pastime, provided a wary eye was kept for marauding shark and crocodile, of which the Melville Island variety are reputed to be the hungriest and most ferocious in the world. Joe himself was nearly taken by a croc and bore some ugly scars on arms, chest, and shoulders that he would carry with him to the grave: 'Him debil-debil a'right dat one.' (Joe's uncle, Larry One-Leg, had acquired his white-fella name from the same source.) These occupational hazards, however, are viewed by the aborigines with the resignation of city-dwellers towards road accidents.

By this time, my wife and I were almost two of the tribe. It was no longer quite so astonishing to watch a man make fire with two sticks almost as quickly as I could light a match, and I ceased to gasp with amazement when Joe's throwing stick sped unerringly into a clump of foliage and a dead bird or lizard fell out instantaneously. We knew that when Fillissy suddenly darted at a hollow log, thrust a long stick into the black cavity and pulled, a furry creature-'possum usually-would be brought struggling forth, its fur hopelessly entangled round the end of the stick. We were no longer amazed, but our admiration at the prowess of these hunting nomads increased as the days passed.

And sitting round the camp-fire at night under a soft velvet sky, with the
water lapping gently against the nearby beach, the contented murmur of gossiping natives, piccaninnies, and dogs became blurred at times as I wondered about the 'advancement' of mankind. Here was life in its simplest form, and I'm not sure that complexity is preferable.

The 'Pukamuni' started haphazardly enough. One morning we crawled from our sleeping-bags to find nearly all the tribe assembled in camp. They weren't doing anything much, but no one seemed anxious to pick up hunting spear or throwing stick. Pretty Polly (an effervescent old woman, hideously mutilated by yaws) made the first positive move in the corroboree preparations. Squatting cross-legged she began to mix a number of different make-up paints from ochre, wood ash, and the sap of certain trees. Then, with a line of little clay pots before her, she began to colour her own particular offering to the dead man, a woven bark basket. Soon, most of the other women followed suit and by midday all were industriously weaving, painting, binding, and carving. The pile of 'send-off' presents grew larger each minute. In the nearby bush an unseen mourner began a rhythmic tap-tapping on a hollow-log drum. A feeling of expectancy crept into the air.

While the women toiled at an increasing speed to swell the gift pile, the men occupied themselves with more personal adornment. Joe extricated himself from between a couple of his dogs and sparked off the proceedings by casually robbing his wife of some of her coloured paints and, using the lid of a food tin as a mirror, began to decorate his face and neck with a startling and most impressive series of zebra stripes. In his hair were placed the exotic tail plumes of birds he had successfully hunted, and around his neck was placed a gut necklace with a fur bobble attached, which he told us would 'keep debil-debill-o-n-g wayway'.

By late afternoon we were surrounded by a ferocious-looking tribe of warriors—only one or two of whom we could still recognize—who looked quite capable of overpowering Nita and me without the slightest qualm and popping us into the ashes for their next meal. Joe now appeared positively frightening, his charcoal-smeared face slashed with vivid white and red ochre streaks. He had added a couple of armbands of sharks' teeth and approached us clutching his ceremonial spear in one hand and a vicious-looking panga in the other. His words, however, were not in keeping with his appearance: 'Gibbit li'l bit 'bacco, Baas.'
Gladly I gave him a pinch from my ever-open tin, as I rested for a moment from filming the colourful scenes around me. Even the camp dogs had caught the fever and were chasing each other round and round the camp, livelier than we had yet seen them. One of the bitches pupped in the middle of the proceedings and again Nita and I marvelled at these aborigines, the only primitive people we had ever met who showed kindness to dumb animals. Under the supervision of the dog's owner, a host of naked children dashed around collecting leafy branches, and within minutes the litter and anxious mother were transplanted to their own whirlie to be left in complete peace under the cool shade of the boughs.

I felt certain that the actual ceremony would start directly dusk fell, and I cursed our equipment which could not cope with semi-dark conditions. Joe had been trying to tell me something about a special corroboree ground, but it was too much for his limited English. Nita and I watched the restless nomads closely, wondering what form the great occasion would take. We watched, and, with camera poised, we waited.

We were still waiting when the warriors had become nothing more than vague silhouettes around the flickering camp-fires. The solitary drummer was still beating out the monotonous dirge and the rest of the tribe were still restlessly milling around between the whirlies. But by nine o'clock there was one different aspect which Nita spotted, and she exclaimed with some amazement, 'All the women are gone.' Somewhat alarmed (for I did not want the men to slip away and hold the corroboree without my getting at least a part of it on film), I approached Joe. He was non-committal, but partly reassuring. 'Alllubra goin' c'rob'ree ground; bye'm bye all men goin' same; makim one bloody-big c'rob'ree true. . . .'

'Bye'm bye' turned out to be next morning. Nita and I were awakened by a bustling in the camp and already the men were filing away in ones and twos towards the thick walls of the jungle. We jumped up, grabbed our camera equipment, and fell in behind Joe. Somehow we knew that this time it was no false alarm.

As the sun filtered through the last of the dawn mists which rolled in from the sea, our party-strangely silent and reverent, despite their savage adornment-emerged from the dense jungle into a clearing already thick with wood smoke. Nita and I gasped with amazement as we broke through
the last barriers of foliage. We were in the burial grounds of our aborigines.

All around the clearing stood groups of huge tree-trunks thrusting up like totem poles. Gaudily painted and painstakingly carved, these were the headstones of the tribal dead. Some of the monuments seemed very old, yet still highly impressive like gaunt fire-blackened fingers-many over fifty feet high-pointing nakedly to the sky. Most of them, however, appeared to be recent additions, for the paint was bright and unfaded. In the middle of these commanding pillars the corroboree ground, an area about fifty feet square and inches thick in dust, lay ready.

When we arrived there was one figure in the centre of the stamping ground: the grief-stricken widow, who swayed about, wailing a dirge and beating two throwing sticks together in a monotonous rhythm. She had been mourning thus for two days and nights consecutively.

Nita and I took up positions as unobtrusively as possible at the edge of the clearing. While my wife made sure that all our available film was ready for immediate use, I took one or two shots of the tribe surrounding the corroboree ground and the mourning widow. Another woman's wail joined that of the chief mourner, and someone else started tapping out a rhythm; then another voice, still female, added to the lament until all the women were wailing in a mournful, strangely rhythmic chorus.

Suddenly, Laurie One-Eye leapt from the crowd of men and assumed a commanding stance in the middle of the clearing. He chanted rapidly in a roaring baritone for something like a minute and then ceased abruptly, his spear raised above his woolly head. From the throats of the entire tribe a great crescendo of shouts rent the silence of the jungle. No undisciplined yelling this, but a swelling volume of sound that crashed from an exciting vocal staccato to an ear-splitting roar. The corroboree had begun.

After the initial incantations there followed, in symbolic mime, a reconstruction of a burial ceremony that has remained unaltered through the centuries. Indeed, as these whirling, glistening figures were direct descendants from world's most primitive man, certainly much of what we were now witnessing had been enacted long before Australia became peopled with white men.
But on Melville Island today, with white man ruling supreme, there have to be modifications to an age-old ritual. No longer is the youngest wife of the deceased burnt alive, and never again will the nearest relatives hurl themselves from nearby treetops to commit suicide in a frenzy of grief. Yet, in spite of the make-believe and the miming, the magnetic pull of ancestral practices is still extremely strong. The warriors had the greatest difficulty in restraining the buxom young widow from throwing herself into the fire. Instead of standing calmly over the token fire, which was merely a handful of twigs giving off a wisp of smoke, she tore herself from the paint-streaked elders and dashed across the clearing straight for the huge cooking fire, which was about two yards in width and crackling merrily. Fortunately some of the old women realized what was happening and intercepted the suicidal widow, who fought like a wildcat in a frantic effort to hurl herself into the flames. For the next hour she remained sobbing-almost in a trance-but now very safe, lashed firmly with twine to four of her compatriots.

The potential suicides from the treetops went more smoothly. While twenty or thirty men clung to the topmost branches, poised before crashing to their deaths fifty feet below, the rest of the tribe entreated them not to take the plunge: the tribe would be weakened; the dead elder would not go on his way rejoicing, etc. Without too much difficulty these relatives were persuaded to abandon the death plunge and they climbed carefully down, wailing tenfold in order to disguise their discomfiture; for even though the entire ceremony is only symbolic, it is still very hard for a warrior to appear chicken-hearted.

After the initiation ceremony, all the gifts were carried reverently to the newly carved group of totem poles. The body had been buried some time previously and now the hump of earth, surrounded by the ornate tree-trunks, was smothered with the parting gifts. The tribe, about a hundred strong, fell silent and stepped back from the grave. A line of young warriors, heavily armed and formidable in their ceremonial paint, formed up and pointed their spears at the remains of their comrade. There was a moment's pause and another of the tribal elders-white-fella name Death's-Head Leo-incited the younger men to frighten away the evil spirits which lurked in the vicinity ready to capture the dead man's spirit as it left the body.
The warriors stamped their feet savagely, once, twice, then twice again, and repeated the pattern at increasing speed, shaking spears and throwing sticks at an imaginary enemy. From the crowd of watchers a ripple of synchronized handclapping arose in an ever-increasing swell, urging the spearmen on to greater effort. Clouds of dust billowed beneath the thudding feet, and a series of blood-curdling yells rent the air.

It was a magnificent spectacle and I hoped fervently that our stock of film would last through this fantastic performance. The sight of the young men, pitting themselves against the unknown, was quite terrifying, and many of the young children were crying with fright at the sight of their normally gentle elder brothers transformed into savage, whirling demons. Nita and I thought quite seriously at one point that they might run amok. Surely those demoniac creatures, almost hypnotized in a welter of dust and sweat, with the goading chant ringing loudly in their ears would not be satisfied with lunging savagely at the empty air! I was frankly quite relieved when the tempo slowed down after about twenty minutes and the dancers, utterly exhausted, fell off one by one and collapsed at the edge of the clearing.

At the end of the casting out of the evil spirits, as the last man staggered on buckling legs back to the crowd, Joe leapt into the centre to tell the story of the dead man's life in mime. Beside us, Billy Geranium told us in hushed pidgin-English whispers exactly what Joe was portraying. It was the story, in savage primordial ballet, of the life of a man of Snake Bay.

Joe danced non-stop for three-quarters of an hour, re-enacting all the major events in the life of his dead brother. The lad at our side pinpointed some of the more intricate phases of the dance, but the verbal assistance was hardly necessary.

Nothing of the dead man's life was omitted, from the day he was born (Joe interpreted this with graphic mimicry of a woman in labour), throughout his career as a hunter and fighter (here there were long sequences of deadly battles fought with knife and spear against animal and human adversaries), to the slowing down of the pace representing age, infirmity, and the last struggle of all. The finale showed Joe briefly and magically endowed with the strength of youth to make the final long walk-about, then a sudden collapse in the centre of the dust-filled arena. The chanting died away for a brief space, and there was a strange silence in the fetid jungle clearing.
But only for a moment. Joe rose wearily to his feet, made his way back into the crowd, and was hardly swallowed up among the glistening ebony bodies when another member of the tribe sprang out with a blood-curdling whoop to perform his own interpretation of an incident in the life they were mourning.

Late in the afternoon we ran out of film. For a while our still-camera was constantly clicking, but even that stock had expired by dusk. We had, however, recorded all that was possible with the very limited means at our disposal, and I was hoping that some highly spectacular ceremony was not being withheld to the last moments of daylight.

We need not have worried. The corroboree had hardly started. All through that night the drums barely paused in their frenzied beat. We slept fitfully and were awakened every few minutes—it seemed—by a wild shriek or a wailing lament. They were still hard at it the next morning and all through the second day, but luckily for our recording the ceremonials proved to be fairly repetitive. A full forty-eight hours elapsed before the burial rites showed the first signs of abating. But once into the third day the incredibly overtaxed stamina wilted rapidly. The whole tribe were now afflicted with the equivalent of a gigantic hangover.

Nita and I, heavy-eyed through lack of sleep but jubilant at the thought of our rolls of precious film, carrying the unique record of a Snake Bay burial ceremony, made our way slowly back to the aboriginal camp on the jungle headland. The exciting climax to our odyssey was almost at an end.

Our whole journey, started more than eighteen months before, had culminated in the moment when we dropped from the tropical skies above the Timor Sea by the most modern method of transport, 'and entered the lives of these primitive people, who were to act as our hosts during one of their rare periods of tribal ritual. I most sincerely hoped that the film we had taken would be as exciting when projected as it was through the viewfinder.

We were to catch the mail plane in the morning. Around us the crowds of black tribesmen, faces split in wide grins, jostled each other laughing and chattering to give us a send-off. Comfortably weighed in our arms were the many presents bestowed on us by our new friends. There was the pair of ironwood throwing sticks, presented by Death's-Head Leo: 'You takem
Boss sure. Takem longa your country all-a-time white-fella.' There, too, was the beautifully carved spearhead (we just couldn't transport the shaft) which Joe carved specially for us; a debil-debil bobble of tightly woven feathers to ward off evil spirits, and two woven baskets together with a group of little carved figures for Nita.

Those Melville Islanders are a wonderful people. Happy, generous, kind to their animals, they were apparently glad to have had us share their company for a while. For my wife and myself, the Melville Island experience had been extremely educational, balancing our sense of values to a great extent. We had found a race of people who could still live a full and satisfying life without any of the amenities of modern civilization. Australia is working on an integrative policy, the plan being to merge the black with the white, rather as New Zealand has done with the Maori. We ourselves hope that for all the full-blooded aborigines, like Warnpiat-L-Miri (alias Black Joe), this will be entirely beneficial.

The little speck in the sky grew larger, and soon its snarling aero-engines were shattering the peace of the Snake Bay jungle. Twin puffs of dust rose as its wheels touched down on the dry earth and it taxied along the short narrow strip. A quick turn-round, the mail-bags bustled out, and the plane was ready for the take-off.

We shook hands solemnly with Black Joe for the last time and walked across to the waiting aircraft. The Melville Islanders' word for goodbye is 'Nim Bungi'. It sounded very moving when shouted from a hundred throats.
After the stimulation of the tropical north and the delightful company of the aborigines, the trip south again—despite the distance and the terrain—seemed rather an anticlimax. By now, anyway, we were quite used to making the most extraordinary demands on our Prima scooter, and another thousand-odd miles seemed merely a hop. Half an hour after rejoining our little machine, which had been garaged a stone's throw from Darwin's stockaded civil prison, the gear was packed, Nita was firmly ensconced, and the engine was ticking over erratically, voicing its displeasure at having been laid up.

Four days later we reached Alice Springs—more commonly called 'The Alice'—an over-publicized township which proved (save for the Flying Doctor Memorial Church) to be a disappointment. The usual assortment of coffee-bars and chromium-plate seemed strangely out of place in the majestic tranquil desert among the Macdonnell Ranges. The church was the exception: although ultra-modern in design—symbolically incorporating the suggestion of an aircraft wing in the construction—it did not appear misplaced. At the entrance was a lily pool of remembrance, while inside a little museum behind the altar contained some of the early equipment used by John Flynn, including a pedal radio set and the great man's swag and blackened billy. This unique and functional memorial was built entirely by the people of Alice Springs on a voluntary basis. It seemed all the nicer when one heard about that.

From one hundred degrees of arid heat we went southwards again aboard the 'Ghan' railway for four hundred miles; then there was another ride through South Australia towards the greatest contrast of the whole trip: a contrast which came as a shock after living for months in the briefest of clothing. For as we re-entered Victoria we were met by a howling snowstorm which lasted for three days and had us shivering constantly and stopping every few miles to make roaring fires at the roadside.

We arrived in Melbourne, two very dejected and half-frozen creatures, at eleven o'clock at night. Desperately I searched through our papers and found the scrap which had been given to me by Jack Kelley—the Mobilgas Rally driver—so long ago in far-away Darwin. I huddled in the 'phone booth, glad for a moment to cut off the biting wind.

'Marriott! Sure I remember. Come right on out. We'll have bowls of hot
soup and a roaring fire to greet you. Sure you can find the way now?’ I answered that warm, friendly voice, saying that wild horses couldn't stop us, and rang off.

So, fittingly in a country with a reputation for its hospitality, we spent the last six weeks of our Australian venture with two of the most friendly people one could hope to meet, in Australia or anywhere-Jack and Lila Kelley of Preston, Melbourne.

Jack's hastily given promise during our brief Darwin encounter was kept to the full. After lavishing their hospitality on us (it was heavenly to sit round a roaring fire in a cosy room, sipping hot soup, after battling in the teeth of a snowstorm for so long) they presented us with the key of Jack and Lila's luxury caravan, with the words, 'It's yours for as long as you want it.' This was, indeed, great generosity.

And so the six weeks passed. We wrote a great many notes, organized the processing and packing of our film, spent most week-ends as guests of our wonderful hosts, and toured the Victorian countryside, generally acclimatizing ourselves once again to city life.

One night I was dragged hastily from our extremely comfortable quarters to watch the path of the first Russian Sputnik as it raced across the sky; at the time I had been engrossed in studying some of the photographs of our aborigines—the most primitive people on earth. The sudden revelation of the first earth satellite zipping over Melbourne was most disturbing.

It also seemed incongruous that, only a few days previously, an expedition a couple of hundred miles from Alice Springs had reported making contact with a tribe of aborigines who had never before seen white men. There were very few details of the discovery at that time, other than that the tribesmen had been almost mesmerized at the sight of the wheels on the expedition trucks. As I watched the fast-travelling light in the sky, I wondered what those primitive men would think (were it possible to explain the technicalities) of their white brothers' latest achievement.

Possibly, we are in the last generation of those who will find adventure on this planet, and future exploration will be limitless. But at that moment, puny as our own efforts seemed, our desire to see over the next horizon had been more than fulfilled.
As the Southampton-bound liner pulled away from the Melbourne wharf, breaking the brightly coloured streamers, and echoing the cheers of those left behind, the faces of our friends gradually merged with the rest of the crowd. It was with mixed feelings that we prepared for the next six weeks of shipboard tedium.

Our adventure was over. The tiny vehicle that had made our journey possible lay once again in the hold beneath us, with nearly thirty thousand miles to its credit. Perhaps not a wise choice for the venture we had undertaken, but with our limited resources, the only possible one.

As we watched the nose of the ship ploughing through the choppy sea of the Great Australian Bight, we thought of the many anxious moments we had undergone in remote and outlandish places, and how thinly lined our pockets were. But, as Livingstone declared, 'the mere animal pleasure of travelling in a wild, unexplored country is very great'. 