

## THE YABBY CREEK DANCE

The last day of December was oven-hot and glaring but storm clouds gathered above the western horizon and promised relief. Fifty Herefords rested in the shade contentedly chewing their cud, oblivious of Pa Jessop's concern for crops, next winter's hay and the worrying echo of knuckles on the water tanks.

The grandfather clock resounded fracturing the somnolence of the house, reminding everyone of the unfaltering progression of time regardless of the elements. But in the kitchen the humble little clock on the mantelpiece made no fuss of the fourth hour and its clear face conveyed the same time as that tall, foreign-faced chimera down the hall.

All afternoon Ann had laboured over the table with the heavy flat-irons pressing respectability into trousers, shirts and dresses. Outside in the laundry Frank lit the copper for baths and directed desultory conversation through the doorway to Pa, squinting hopefully again towards the clouds; his face a web of worry-lines.

Contrastingly, Grandma sparkled. Eddie had returned from cane-cutting in perfect time for the New Year's Eve dance and his family crowded around now expecting presents. He handed Grandma a bottle and an old telephone directory.

'Oh, Eddie, likker indeed!' she said in feigned disapproval and hugged the sherry to her bosom. But she frowned at the heavy book and looked up at her larrikin son. 'What foolishness is this, y' great article? We ain't got no telyphone!'

Jessie, possessed of earlier enlightenment, erupted into laughter. 'Grandma, it's for the lavvy!'

‘Oh!’ squawked the old woman and went away chuckling.

Eddie’s homecoming always increased the festive atmosphere of New Year’s Eve and Jessie loved him the more for it. The dance was anticipated by much careful preparation and this alone levitated her to an ethereal plane of happiness. She felt good, generous and loving – even towards pesky little Jimmy – and yearned for evening.

Tawny translucence at last yielded to twilight and Frank parked the cattle truck, scrubbed earlier for the occasion, alongside the Yabby Creek hall. Jessie and Jimmy jumped from the truck’s tray and ran, laughing, towards the enticing balloons.

The Jessops joined the queue. Stout, cushiony Isobel Maddocks, ensconced beside the doorway, was selling raffle tickets; her frock’s gaudy bodice with the deliberate negligence of unfilled buttonholes loudly trumpeting its message. She lifted stunning eyes to Eddie and her scarlet lip-slash stretched radiantly.

‘Oooh, *here he is!*’ she exclaimed with undisguised relief that he was at last back from Queensland. ‘I’m savin’ every dance for you, good-lookin’!’ Boldly she stroked his arm and, confident of a flirting response, she laughed and wiggled and exploited her eye-beauty in an emulated theatrical manner.

Eddie slapped his chest. ‘Oh, Izzobella! *At – last!*’ he exclaimed and the queued people laughed at the play-acting. And then, feigning fear he asked: ‘But where’s y’ jealous old husband?’

Isobel shrieked. ‘Oh Eddie, you *kill* me! You *know* he don’t dance.’ Coarse-grained Mrs Maddocks was affected by an even greater disregard of decorum whenever Eddie was nigh. Liberated by Claude’s absence – safely distant working in the stringy-bark forest – she smiled up at the attentive handsome face; her slow wink declaring: ‘I’m *all yours!*’

Grandma bristled at Isobel's excessive familiarity and in the midst of onlookers' smirks and frowns, her tut-tuts grew into snipes. In this competition for possession of her son she was hotly conscious of the winning weaponry displayed at Isobel's bodice. She dug sharp knuckles into Eddie's back. 'Get inside, Edward, y' silly fool – flirtin' with married women.'

Indifferent Isobel simpered up to the prize with simple-minded coquetry and whispered, 'I'm your little angel, darl,' – despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Discreet Ann, standing behind her mother-in-law, checked a spurt of laughter but Grandma's kindled face glowered. 'Ha! *Angel*? It's to the other place *you'll* be going, y' brazen hussy!' she jeered, and threw a trite finale at the unconcerned expression: 'While the cat's away, eh Isobel? Y' oughta be *ashamed*!' she hissed, and her agitated old head shook involuntarily.

What's a hussy?' whispered Jimmy.

Ann whispered back: 'Rude lady,' – contradiction of terms eluding.

It took a moment for Grandma to recover her equanimity, helped in this by Ann's solicitude and by the soothing normality of surrounding levity. And, with the element of menace effectively spent, the now impatient queue moved on.

There was a multiplicity of sights and sounds within the hall mingled with indefinable olfactory influences. The air buzzed with elated chatter. Little arpeggios of children's excited laughter prompting Jessie and Jimmy to join the volley of squealing missiles skidding in leather shoes the length of the floor.

Looking around, the Jessops nodded amiably towards familiar faces and lifted their hands in greeting. There were expressions cheerful and friendly. Some reflected palpitating excitement; many glowed with the coveted bloom of youth and a few displayed a tranquil

acceptance of the challenges and rewards of middle-age. Other faces at peace with encroaching years radiated serene contentment – ready for God.

Gentle Ann and becalmed Grandma laughed at the children's skidding antics. Pa and Frank, after a few minutes of manly conviviality at the beer table, sauntered back to their womenfolk leaving Eddie loitering beneath the tobacco smoke, furthering his rehydration.

The mood of joyful festivity increased in the festooned hall. Voices rumbled with talk and laughter rippled sporadically above the occasional grizzling of bewildered babies. Infant fretting excepted, the crowd of many colours became expectantly silent when the headmaster followed the musicians onto the stage to deliver his greeting:

'The children worked diligently last term practising ballroom dancing,' he announced after the preliminaries, 'and now they'll take their places for the Barn Dance.' A single clap motioned the dancers. 'Thank you.'

He nodded towards the musicians and extended his hands to the audience, inviting applause. Spontaneously it came. The pianist struck a progression of chords. Drumsticks hovered and the saxophonist brought the instrument to his lips. Paired boys and girls stood waiting. The dance began.

Frank and Ann beamed when their children swung past and Grandma nodded proudly to Pa and tapped her fingers on her purse in time to the music. Pa leaned to Ann: 'You never forget, y' know. It's like riding a bike.'

As the evening progressed the women grew chattier, the children rowdier and some men more magnetised to the beer table. Collectively they had acquired a sense of euphoria and good will towards all. The men's courteous exchanges became slaps upon backs which

grew more vigorous as the night advanced and there arose loud guffaws, suspiciously indicative of coarse humour.

The pianist bore the pandemonium with fortitude: her back rigid; fingers pecking or caressing the keys according to the style and tempo of the dances – Veleta, Gypsy Tap, Canadian Three Step, Pride of Erin ... and the beautiful Jazz Waltz.

Pa stood and, honouring Grandma with a dignified bow, led her to centre floor. Few were proficient in this dance, most preferring to watch the accomplished couples. Expecting worthy entertainment, all grew quiet.

The music permeated the hall with enchanting influence. Pa drew Grandma into his arms, blue eyes bonded with hers, and they moved into the smooth pattern of the dance. With elegant ease they seemed to glide, executing the precise steps, avoiding other couples with unerring skill. And in their sun-weathered faces could be seen expressions of pride, humility and devotion.

‘I didn’t realise they could dance so well!’ Ann exclaimed.

‘They always danced, that’s how they met,’ replied Frank. He was visibly moved by the sight of his hard-working old parents waltzing gracefully, lovingly together again, and watching them now he knew their own special love song was sending them along.

At suppertime Jessie and Jimmy joined the queue of children carrying laden plates around to the seated folk. As their parents were handed theirs, boisterous mirth exploded from the beer drinkers – Eddie’s endearing laugh predominating. But a moment later the uplifted grins of men and women facing the exit dropped to alarmed stares when Isobel’s husband appeared, the enormousness of him dwarfing the doorway.

A presentiment of serious trouble brought a decrease in the drone of conversations and the general gaiety of the people and a portentous hush settled over them. Everyone knew Claude Maddocks. He was the largest man in Yabby Creek: tall and beefy, with a thick neck and bullocky shoulders ... and all knew he was tortured by a jealousy regularly wrenched out of him by the promiscuity of his wife – for whom he slaved and loved, nonetheless.

Through the crowd Claude spied Eddie, the most abrasive disturbance of his existence. He saw a brown arm in a rolled-up white sleeve; hand tilting a glass to grinning lips; and the free arm evincing a proprietary claim upon Isobel's fleshy shoulders. The adorer, engrossed in Eddie and twittering puerile homage, was unaware of the descending hush and across her face for all to see was scandalous, submissive man-worship.

Claude advanced, his powerful chest in the navy-blue singlet exuding a strong oniony-sweat odour. People drew back and gave him room. In seven strides he was hovering, enraged, over Isobel.

'Get – home!' he thundered, flinging a thick hairy arm towards the door. Isobel's scarlet smile vanished. She jerked guiltily away from Eddie; felt the blood-rush and put hands to cheeks in a futile attempt to conceal it.

She was quick to dissemble however, and looked hesitantly from one man to the other and around at the crowd. Defiantly, for her staring audience, she affected jaunty nonchalance and like a naughty child spurning repentance she sashayed, chin uplifted, all the way to the door. Eddie was left to explain everything.

It proved very timely that Claude Maddocks had arrived a day sooner than his wife had expected, but now his big aching heart was beset by an ambivalence – satisfaction and anger. 'She'll keep,' was his subliminal resolve. First he would deal with Lover Boy.

‘Outside!’ He ordered in his laconic manner.

‘Oh, my poor boy!’ cried Grandma. ‘Oh God, please help him!’ she supplicated, as one does in moments of peril.

Eddie lifted his hands outwards; an impotent appeal for a fair hearing. ‘Aah, s-s-shimmer down, Claude,’ his unwilling tongue stuttered in a tone of attempted conciliation. ‘She was jus’ holdin’ meyup!’ (This was more valid than he realised.) He slapped his lips together, arched the black eyebrows idiotically and staggered backwards against Frank.

‘For gawd’s sake Eddie!’ panicked Frank. ‘Come and sit down.’ But Eddie, as always, did not feel inclined to heed brotherly advice.

Several brave cajoling voices issued from the fore of the crowd: ‘Come on Claude!’ ‘Let it go, mate,’ and ‘There’s kids here, Claude!’ However some husbands, who bore no particular antipathy towards Eddie Jessup, were nonetheless mindful that he was too handsome and too frequently observed by their wives and daughters. They harboured guilty, secret satisfaction now at the prospect of his being punished for his envied winning ways.

Claude, however, was deaf to entreaties and again directed his hostility exclusively to Eddie. He towered menacingly, his fury percolating. ‘Y’ been *daancing* with her, haven’t ya, eh?’ He stressed the word dancing as if it denoted a sort of voyeurism.

Eddie looked at him blankly. ‘Nasherally!’ he replied in a queer, comical treble. ‘It’s a dansh ain’t it?’ And for a long moment his eyelids refused to reopen.

Maddocks, now a ripe volcano of jealousy, vibrated dangerously. ‘Y’ been seein’ Issie while I been away, haven’t ya? Been in my house ... been maulin’ my wife, haven’t ya, *eh?* EH?’

Claude's chest-prodding finger chased off the last of Eddie's tolerance. In his delusive state of invincibility he challenged the provocation, blurting out: 'Ah, come off it y' mongrel! We're jus' frens— I wouldn't touch her with a—'

'Bloody hell, Eddie!' interposed Frank nervously. 'Get going while y'still can!'

'Nah!' Eddie exclaimed, entirely drained of patience now and overflowing with illusory confidence. He brandished his arm in the air. 'This bloody drongo's got a thumpin' comin' to' im.' He struck an exaggerated combative pose and swung the first punch, which almost stole his balance.

Expletives burst forth from both brawlers. The crowd exclaimed in clamorous protest and condemnation, many shouting: 'Get outside!' Other mouths gaped and eyes stared but no one dared intervene. Maddocks navigated his rubber-legged rival outdoors and Frank and Pa followed, trying to pacify Claude but feeling miserably unequal to the task.

Nevertheless, Frank felt fraternally obliged to challenge the aggressor but some current of wisdom zipped through his brain and saved him. And Pa muttered: 'God, let me be young again for five minutes!'

The remaining Jessops hastened out into the warm night with the crowd, every face wearing a look of agitation – or excitement.

Again, the big man spoke only to Eddie. 'I don't like blokes hangin' round my wife,' he growled murderously, 'especially *you*!' and having discharged the preliminaries he drew back his fist and punched his rival hard across the side of his head.

Eddie felt as though a horse had kicked him. He reeled, half-recovered and, acquainted now with the strength of the leviathan he faced, struck out again in an optimistic

endeavour to fracture Claude's jaw. The big man's eyes stared round with amazement as he felt his face for blood, then drew back the mighty arm and thumped Eddie again.

Grandma stood by twisting her hands and alternately clutching Ann and the children. Pa and Frank hovered, distressed and powerless. Jessie felt a sickening heart-leap when her uncle's head flew back and he again met the ground ... and stayed there.

Frank and Pa, assisted by other work-roughened hands, hauled their still-as-death relative up onto the truck. He didn't come round until they were halfway home.

'Craazy idiot,' Frank muttered under the rattle of the vehicle. He shook his head and kept his eyes on the patch of lighted road ahead.

Grandma peered back through the window at Eddie, barely visible in the moonlight. 'He's just *lyin*' there!' she whimpered like a frightened child. Ann took the trembling old hand and held it.

In the back of the truck Jimmy studied the faint outline of the inert face. 'I think he's *dead*!' he said dolorously in his measured way.

But Pa, who had seen it all before, replied: 'Don't worry matey, he'll live!'

Jessie, in utter dejection of spirits broke her brooding silence. 'Well good riddance if he doesn't!' she seethed, her recent concern a frivolous misconception.

'Jessie!' Pa scolded. 'Don't talk like that!'

'He *is* our uncle,' Jimmy reminded.

'Well, so what!' Jessie exclaimed. Swallowing tears away, she turned to her brother, entreating him to appreciate her disappointment.

‘Jimmy, he spoilt it all. *I* didn’t want to come home yet! I wanted to join the circle and sing that Old Land Sign song.’ She blinked rapidly. ‘And I wanted to shout “Happy New Year!” and—’ Her tone swept upwards: ‘And what’ll all the kids at school say after *this*?’ With tempestuous finality she declared: ‘I’m *ashamed* of him!’ thus forgoing the understanding she sought. Nevertheless in some peculiar way it relieved her to admit this disregard of family allegiance.

Preoccupied Jimmy continued to stare at the dark outline of Uncle Eddie. ‘Hope he’s not dead,’ he mumbled slowly.

The truck vibrated over the corrugations and dust tumbled along in the scant glimmer of tail-lights. With groaning effort Eddie roused himself and, squinting through a gap in the side of the truck, saw moonlit bush swishing past. Gingerly he resettled his volcanic head on the hessian bag, muttered incoherently, closed the puffed eye-slits and retreated into silent oblivion. And Jimmy withdrew his mind now from the Yabby Creek cemetery.

They sat at the table peering into their wine glasses and pondering upon Eddie’s recurring transgressions. Grandma fidgeted with the pepper and salt shakers until it irritated Pa and he reached over and lightly tapped her hand.

‘Why does he flirt with that stupid woman, love?’ he whispered in a plaintive, enquiring tone. ‘Is he a complete idiot?’ he asked her, unthinkingly forfeiting conjugal cuddles for the night.

The maternal countenance scowled fiercely. ‘He’s just a bit high spirited, that’s all,’ Grandma understated superbly and, ignoring Pa’s snort of deprecation, she glared at everyone, daring them to profane the name of Edward Jessup. No one did. They just meditated under a spell cast on them by Saint Eddie snoring stertorously in his bed-heaven.

The clock, like a metronome, clicked away the last tremulous pulses of the dying year to the kettle's moaning dirge. Jimmy, leaning on Ann, struggled against leaden eyelids to follow the black hands approaching magical reunion.

Contemplatively Jessie eyed her father seeking to divine his thoughts. A twitch of a smile teased his mouth – the precursor of something funny. She watched and waited while a moth worked hard to knock itself out against the lamp.

Frank's fingers interlocked behind his head. He tilted the chair, stretched his legs under the table and emitted a soft laugh. Slowly, idly, everyone looked at him.

'Saaame old Eddie,' he said grinning. A meditating pause. 'Same old Yabby Creek dance.' Frank's smile broadened showing his back teeth. 'Same old New Year's *bloody* Eve!' His head went back and he burst into body-shaking laughter.

The spell was broken. Influenced by fatigue and mellowed by wine they each granted tacit concessions to Eddie's weaknesses and smiled indulgently until all were infected with quiet hysteria – even Grandma. And when the hall clock chimed out the triumphant hour they refilled their glasses, raised them high and yelled: 'Hap-py New Yeeear!' and went off again into peals of wet-eyed hilarity.

Outside, chimney sparks drifted into the warm air. Promissory clouds obscured the moon and crept stealthily over the thirsty land to rain with malevolent treachery into the sea. And farmers with brown paddocks shook their heads at the ironic contravention of man's basic law of survival.

And in the Jessop homestead the big clock and the little clock began the serious task of measuring away another year.