



Pebbles in the Stream

An Australian saga in several episodes by Graham Price Chapter 3

The wind had whipped up the Thames to a fury, so much so that small craft were forbidden to take to the water. The sky was swirling with black clouds heavy with rain and the art deco window frames on the Chelsea flat rattled and chattered as if to burst open at any minute.

Caroline shivered and bent to turn up the oil heater, moments before her great aunt Vanessa Trengrove came over with a cocktail in her hand. “Think we should up the heater, my sweet?”

“Already done, aunty. *My* you do look spiffing in that dress; takes ten years off your age!”

“Do you think the men will notice? Most of them are half blind and almost in their graves.” She spun slowly on her low heels, allowing the green and gold dress to flare out.”

Caroline laughed. “I’m sure they will, but it makes me wonder what kind of presents will they bring to my 95-year-old great aunt? Some exercise equipment, perhaps?” She laughed again. “Which is what you never seem to need.”

Vanessa took a small shrimp paté from the plate offered to her by her nephew, Charles Vickers. “Thank you Charlie, at least you are here on time and making yourself useful. Just had your seventy-third, isn’t it, eh? You and me share that same glorious sign, Scorpio, keeper of hidden secrets. So, tell me Charlie, what secrets have you to tell me tonight? Let’s have it, kiddo.”

Charlie put the plate down on the mantelpiece, stared into the flames for a moment, then turned to Vanessa. “You’re the one with the secrets, aunty. Lots of them still untold from the early days. I think I have run out of mine. Totally empty. Nothing in there for you to see anymore.”

Caroline took the glass of champagne offered to her by one of Charlie’s sons, a thin forty-something man beginning to bald, with a florid face and moustache that already had the incursion of silver hairs. “Thanks, Geoffrey, perhaps you also have some secrets to tell us, seemingly your father doesn’t? I haven’t seen you in a long time, hear you’re getting married soon.”

Geoffrey bowed slightly to Caroline. “Yes, there’s my fiancée over there by the Chippendale; Mercia; lovely, isn’t she!”

Caroline swung her eyes around to view the young lady. A redhead of indeed very pleasant proportions, she thought. But what’s upstairs in the attic? Geoffrey didn’t seem to have much in that capacity either. He’d attempted to woo her when she first came over from Australia, but thankfully Brett had come on the scene and squeezed him out. She had found a great sense of relief at that because Geoffrey was becoming intensively crowding.

As if to curtail any further conversation by Geoffrey, Vanessa seemed to moan “Oh, I do wonder if everyone is able to come tonight, the weather is just so foul.”

“Yes, well, that’s London I fear,” said Charles. “Ah, there’s your beau, Caroline . . . I do forget his name though . . . Brendan or, what was it now?”

“Brett McKinnley.” Caroline moved away, heading toward the entrance where Brett had entered. Vanessa had hired a manservant and a maid for the party and the manservant was helping Brett out of his overcoat and hat. Caroline slid up to them on the shiny parquet floor, touching Brett by the arm. “Glad you’re here, some of my relatives are being a little bit troll at the moment. Perhaps we should liquefy them a bit, eh? I’m sure you could help with that, should make them forget themselves somewhat.”

Brett shot a look at her from his bright blue Scottish eyes. “Surely, you don’t need me to do that for you, Caroline. You have enough spark in you to control almost anyone.”

“Mmmm, how sweet of you darling, c’mon then, come and meet the trolls.”

By 9.30, Vanessa’s guests of old had arrived, not that there were many left, simply three. Quentin James, swishing in his purple and red kaftan who kissed her hand, pushed back the flowing locks of his long white hair and leered a little at Caroline. Peachy Wendover struggled with her ivory inlaid walking stick and somewhat staggering across the floor, held by the elbow by Oliver Wainscoat, an exceedingly thin octogenarian who looked as if the air from an electric hair dryer could



blow him over at any moment. He was dressed in a somewhat faded frock coat with a red waistcoat. These three, then, were all that remained from Vanessa's late Bloomsbury days. Vanessa gushed over them, introducing all around. The party carried on into the night, while outside the wind rose in its fury, pushing dark clouds dramatically across the night sky.

No moon tonight, thought Brett, as he cornered Caroline's great aunt on a gilded sofa. Anyway, it's cosy in here. What a delight! These old art deco units were worth a fortune, he figured. This one would turn over at a fair price. Values in Chelsea were pushing up at the moment.

"You're not really old enough to have been part of the Bloomsbury group, are you?"

Vanessa gave him a stare he thought had suddenly shot out of one of Alfred Hitchcock's black and white murder movies, but then her face softened. "For a real estate broker, you do seem to ask some unusual questions, but then, I understand that you are an admirer and curator of art, so you are forgiven. But, that also seems to be a somewhat contradiction. How can these two activities dwell within the same sweet Celtic body of yours? Ah, you do have a certain physique, don't you! If I were younger . . .! Oh, I am rather tired . . . I feel I have overdone things tonight. Must be feeling my age, ha ha. But, to answer your question, we were what you may call the remnants of the Bloomsbury movement. The elders were mostly gone by the time I came of age, but there were enough of us to continue, to shore things up. Of course, we were too young to have known those who began it all, but I knew Noel Oliver in her later years . . . you know she was Rupert Brooke's lover. We corresponded. That was . . . is . . . rather memorable. She was a remarkable person."

"Brooke? The poet who died in service during the war in 1915?"

"Yes, you are up to date with that, no doubt. So tragic for such a talented young man . . . you know what D.H. Lawrence said of him?"

"I have no idea."

Vanessa smiled and placed a hand on his knee. "*Bright Phoebus smote him down . . . It's all in the saga.*"

"What did he mean, it is all in the saga?"

"Ah, you are not familiar with Apollo . . . Phoebus Apollo! The young god who considered he had the sweetest voice for poetry, who was killed by Marysas for boasting. Yes, boasting doesn't get you far, does it, eh? But Rupert had no need for boasting, it was far beyond him. It would never have entered his mind. I would have liked to have known him; we would have been magnificent lovers."

Brett eased himself on the divan, stretching his legs. "You sound very fond of the man."

Vanessa nodded. "If I had been there in earlier times, there is no doubt I would have fallen in love with him, just as Noel Oliver did."

Brett sighed. "That's pushing things somewhat, but even so, you must have had other lovers during your life?"

"The impudent cheek of you! Yes, there were some, and one of them is here tonight; see if you can guess which one. But getting back to Rupert, have you read him?"

"No, not really. I like poetry, but I haven't come across his works."

"No, they're not all that readily known. But shall I invite you into something now that will give you an inclination, my sweet, to indulge your senses far above this world?"

"I don't understand."

"You will, if you listen to this:

'When you were there, and you, and you,
Happiness crowned the night; I too,
Laughing and looking, one of all.
I watched the quivering lamplight fall
On plate and flowers and pouring tea
And cup and cloth; and they and we
Flung all the dancing moments by
With jest and glitter. Lip and eye
Flashed on the glory, shone and cried,
Improvident, unmemoried;
And fitfully and like a flame
The light of laughter went and came.
Proud n their careless transience moved
The changing faces that I loved'

"But the best is yet to come. Shall I continue?"

Brett nodded. "You have me enraptured. It is brilliant, please, please continue."

"Just a little, just enough to whet your appetite, young man:"



‘Till suddenly, and otherwhence,
I looked upon your innocence.
For lifted clear and still and strange
From the dark woven flow of change
Under a vast and starless sky
I saw the immortal moment lie . . .’

Oh, I can't go on, it is too much . . . too strong, don't you see! Too brave! Too strong! Immortal!"

The green and gold dress shimmered beside him. He was overawed at the words she had spoken; words from a very long time ago that spoke to him even of today. So, what has changed? If you looked at this kind of poetry, nothing had changed he thought. The words of those days were just as relevant to this day. This woman was amazing.

Caroline had come across, leaving a small group enjoying nibbles and champagne, "Well, what are you two up to?"

"Just because I've been commandeering your lovely boyfriend, no need to be jealous, Caroline. Besides, we seem to have formed a fascinating association. Be careful, my dear, I might just lure this one away from you. My bed is not always warm enough. And the nights are so cold out there."

Brett drank down the last of his champagne. "Yes, I might just have to move in and comfort you."

Caroline clapped a hand to her forehead. "You two are just so far off the planet. First of all you didn't much care if either of you lived or died, and now you are here talking romance. Lordy, I give up. Come on, Brett, it's late, and we should allow this dowager great aunt of mine to rest in her wide bed together with her current lover, the sweet and affectionate Prometheus."

"Prometheus?"

Caroline squeezed herself between Vanessa and Brett. "Prometheus, her Abyssinian cat, which she loves to bits. No man could ever take the place of that relationship, even if he offered her all the gold and silver in the universe. Prom is the real ruler of this household and the watcher over my great aunt. You will find, if you intend to move in, that you will face a force more dominating than anything you have ever felt."

Vanessa laughed. "Oh, I have to admit that she is right, my darling Brett. Prom rules my life, and Brett, I am so sorry that it is not on between you and me. Perhaps you should simply stay with my grand niece for as long as she will have you, and that, I am sure, may not be very long, my dearest. Now, it is time for bed, time to say goodnight to everyone here, and to thank all for coming. I am happy, but I am so tired, so, Caroline, would you do me the pleasure of saying goodnight to all?"

The wind lashed the shutters and rattled the art deco windows. The majority of the small crowd had departed, searching on their mobile phones for updated details of their cabs, and when the cabs arrived, they hastened with all purpose into the warm interiors. Umbrellas blew inside out with the fierce wind gusts and dresses whipped up around varicosed legs. Soon, all was silent except for the gramophone whispering blues of the 1950s through the flat. Caroline suppressed a yawn and took Brett by the hand. "It's time you skipped, my love. Oh, it's been a grand night . . . but sorry you can't stay. Give me a bell tomorrow and we'll arrange lunch."

"Bring your great aunt. She's really taken an attraction to me. I'd like to see more of her."

Caroline laughed. "You estate agents! The flat's not for sale, not for a very long time my dear. She will probably outlive you."

Brett lowered his head and pretended to be miffed. "Oh, Cas, how could you!"

The sleek, tawny Abyssinian cat, Prometheus, jumped from the windowsill and landed near Brett's feet. A pair of golden eyes stared up at Brett as the cat sat in front of him, swishing its tail. He laughed. "Okay, okay, I get the message."

Caroline burst into a fit of giggles.

Tom pushed the typewriter away from him. The Remington stared back at him, ribbon black and red and almost juicy when he'd changed it. Rather too inky. He'd forgotten to wash his fingers, but it didn't matter. He wasn't going anywhere for lunch, neither was the typewriter. Bloody bulky thing, he cursed. He'd prefer something a little smoother, such as the Olivetti he had at home. Ah, the Italians might be bringing their mafia mob out to Australia with the recent immigrants, but they bloody-well made good typewriters. And the food! Sweet angel! Down in Melbourne the other week he'd dined with one of the reporters from *Il Globo*. Ah, such succulent dishes prepared by illustrious Italian chefs. Perhaps he could persuade McGregor to send him on a mission to Italy, though he thought if he was going to shoot off overseas, it had better be London



where Caroline was; it had been too long and the ache within him was building. Sarah, the weather reporter in the office next to him, was leaking out some recording of yesterday's memories, and that's all he needed to hear; the memories of yesterday; he and Caroline under the eucalyptus beside the banks of the river when all the others had gone. Just the two of them, he seventeen and she sixteen. She had been drawing him as he lay back in the grass and the grey sand, just his face. "It looks rather gaunt," he'd said as he peeped over her shoulder, caressing her arm. "Well, you are gaunt," she had said and turned to kiss him. "If it wasn't for your lovely golden hair . . ." And then she laughed. "Oh, how we copped it in school for being the golden pair . . . you and I, so perfect in the eyes of everyone else, but you can't be perfect without everyone having a crack at you."

"I loved you even then," he said, "Golden hair or not. You could have had the darkest hair and the darkest skin and I would have loved you no matter what."

She jumped up. "What if we dyed our hair black? What you reckon, Tom. That would be a scream. We'd really fit in then, wouldn't we?"

"Don't be damn silly. Changing your face or changing your hair won't make any difference to the mob. C'mon, Cas, what's got into you?"

She burst out laughing. "Ha, did you think I was serious. Just goes to show you, Tom Marshall, how little you understand us women."

"Well, my sweet love. I'm serious. I'll never love anyone ever but you, Cas. Never. That's a solemn promise, and we have our pebbles to last us till the end of time."

"Oh, Tom. You are just too serious now." She leant over him and sought his lips, touching them lightly, teasing him a little, then softer, and firmer then, and finally luxuriating in that sensual feeling that only Tom could give her. She felt her nipples grow firm and longed to feel the touch of his hand upon them. The passion between them surged until the sand fled in various directions underneath them. If this was heaven, then let it be forever.

McGregor startled him by coming by with a sheaf of papers in his hand. Tom looked over the top of the Remington at his boss's face. "Something up?"

"It's just this last piece of yours on minister Savilla. I'm not so sure that we won't be sued. Do you think you've gone too far? I'd need a few more facts before I can print it.

"Leave it with me. I'll check a few points and let you have a revised version, just to satisfy the bastard."

James McGregor grinned. "I trust you, Tom, you're my best reporter. It's just that this one runs a little close to the wire."

Tom nodded. The telephone rang, and McGregor waved off, turning back toward his office. Tom picked up the cream handle of the phone and listened. "Tom!" The voice whispered in his ear, soft, smooth and silky. It was Jennifer, McGregor's daughter. "You are coming for my birthday, aren't you, Tom?"

He leaned back in the chair. Oh, how could he resist this lovely young girl? Jennifer with the sultry looks, the figure that would put to shame the goddesses of the Iliad. The auburn hair that shone and sparkled in the afternoon light. And the sweet aroma of her body next to you, and then there was Beatrice, Jennifer's younger sister . . . if it wasn't for his dedication to Caroline . . .! McGregor's voice carried from his office "Don't forget, Tom, 1900 hours sharp."

The girls' mother, Avril, took Tom by the arm as he entered the hallway. "I'm so glad you've come, Tom," she said as she manoeuvred him into the extended lounge where a crush of noisy young men and women were telling rude jokes and laughing outrageously. Tom smelled the faint wisp of expensive perfume coming from Avril, and thought how delicate. She knows a thing or two about modesty, but he knew where she was steering him. Right up to Jennifer. The birthday girl was half leaning against a Steiner piano, holding a glass of champagne and talking to several young men who surrounded her like crabs hunting for food. Tom laughed inwardly as Avril simply clawed several of the youths away with her left hand, while winging Tom into Jennifer's presence with her right hand. He had felt her grip tightening on him and thought that her sporting prowess as a leading golfer had given her the strength of a man. Who would have believed that in this petite body there lay such power? So, both mentally and physically strong. He wondered if her daughters had inherited those qualities?

"Hi Tom, so glad you come come." Jennifer placed her glass on an occasional table, leaned forward and kissed Tom on his cheek. Again, the perfume was there, also subtle and cleverly moderated, though what brand it was he could not tell except that he thought it was quite delightful . . . and sensuous. Which, contrary to what Jennifer perhaps thought, stirred a mild passionate memory of Caroline within him. He kissed her in return.

"Happy 21st, Jen. Just a little something for you." He handed her a small gift-wrapped box.

"I won't open it yet," she said, taking the box and giving his hand a squeeze. "But you all can see how perfect Tom is in wrapping things, so neat, and the rose on top is an example of a very thoughtful man."

"Hear, hear," said Avril, clapping her hands, and Tom blushed.



A connected living area opened up into an outdoor setting where there was room enough for some dancing. McGregor had hired a three-piece band which played suitable 1950s music and sometimes dished out old favourites such as *Stardust*, *In the Mood*, *I'm Wild Again*, and when they proceeded to play *At Last*, Tom found himself again face to face with Jennifer.

"I think this is our song, Tom." She took him by the hand and they mingled with the crowded dancers. Tom thought there really wasn't much room for dancing, just simply moving against your partner as other couples attempted to circle around. He could feel the warmth of Jennifer's body close to him, and although he wasn't all that concerned, she began to softly sing the lyrics into his ear. "At last, my love has come along . . . my lonely days are over, and life is like a song . . . at last!"

"Is that so?" he laughed, managing to spin her to the outside of the circle of dancers.

"It could be, Tom. You know how I feel about you." He led her to a garden seat, where her sister Beatrice came along with some snacks.

"We're still young, Jen, there's a lot of world out there to see. I'm not ready for anything like marriage."

"I'll wait." They held hands and looked into each others eyes.

What could he say? There was no doubt that she was delightful and if they were to marry he would have wonderful in-laws, but the shadow of another kept crossing his mind — Caroline . . . but so far away in another land. And there was no way McGregor would release him from his commitment to *The Daily Mail*. •

To be continued