

UPPER FLOWERDALE

It was a fine house built of the best timbers, blackwood and celery-top pine, and it was perched on top of a hill like a medieval castle. He built it for his bride Catherine, a widow with two children, whom he was soon to marry.

Probably some member of the Van Dieman's Land Company, passing through this volcanic region between the shore and the river, named the area 'Flowerdale', and, in this deep wet forest my father, Frank Upston, chose a timber block well to the South. Another block, two kilometres north was for his home, which he built on a rise between two creeks, at the junction of the Hyena Rocks and the main Upper Flowerdale Roads. One, a coffee coloured stream, tumbled out of the high country in the north, an extension of the Sisters Hills region, the other a clear running creek rose in the South Western rainforest around the Dip Range.

With his partner George Tucker, my father operated a paddle driven saw mill on the bank of a small stream that emptied into the Flowerdale River, near the present bridge, so he selected the very best well dried timber for his castle. George's wife and family lived along the Flowerdale Road nearer the mill, and ran the local Post Office from their home. Dad's eldest sister, Emma, was the wife of his partner's brother Jim. They farmed the holding that joined ours on the Upper Flowerdale Road together with a large family. The older members of their family, Dad's nieces and nephews, were nearer his age than was his sister or brother in law. I suspect that the main reason my father chose that particular spot to build his house was that his wife and children would not be so isolated while he was at the mill.

Brother in law Jim Tucker and four sons had already cleared, cultivated, and grassed a fair portion of their land and were growing potatoes and swede turnips for the market as well as fodder for the livestock. Three of the older girls and our Aunt Emma, like other families in the district, took charge of the dairy operations, leaving the men to clear and prepare the land for planting. This was the general way of providing some income while waiting for the farm to produce.

Coming from more settled parts of the island Mum must have found the heavily timbered terrain that they passed through on the trip to her new home rather alienating. From a girl she had been nursemaid to the children of Dr. Rock and his wife in their beautiful Georgian home in Westbury. When her husband Maurice Sullivan died, she had returned there with her two children; Jack aged 18 months and Mary born only days after her father's death; to again assist in the doctor's household. Jack, who adored his

uncle Pat, spent much time at his grandparent's home at Tonkataboo, later called Weetah, where Aunts Annie, Nell, and Uncle Pat, still unmarried, resided with their parents.

Dad had pushed and pumped his bone shaker push-bike at weekends from the mill to Westbury to woo his thirty years old attractive widow Catherine Sullivan. After the wedding, in the Holy Redeemer Church at Westbury on 18th of November 1909, they had traveled by train to Latrobe for an over-night stay at Lord's Hotel. Tatlow's coach picked them up quite early next morning for a long pleasant drive to Wynyard where the trusty mare, 'Doll,' was stabled at Cryan's Hotel. A three hours drive in the spanking new buggy had landed them home.

Coming through Forth on the coach, she had pointed out the house on the hill, where she had spent her short married life, also the Church and small graveyard where her late husband was buried. The two small children of that marriage, Michael John aged 7 years - always called Jack, and five years old Mary were with their maternal grandparents, Ellen and Michael McLoughlin, at Weetah. Aunt Nell would bring them to their new home directly.

There were already some fine estates and stately homes in the Flowerdale and Moorleah district and Dad named families who lived there, as they passed along. Scotty Steward's house was fast disappearing behind the rapidly growing orchard that he had planted and the Macracapas on the ridge ahead, indicated that a residence had been there for at least thirty years. He showed her a road leading to Preolinna, where a seam of coal it was hoped would soon result in mining operations. This was already in the process of development, with a train line to the mine on the drawing boards.

As they crossed the plank-bridge across the Flowerdale River he told her of a couple people who lived near John Lyons and his wife Sophia, with a large growing family. "They are looking forward to a call and we will do that soon" he promised. He pointed upstream where she could see a large paddle wheel turned by a foaming stream that fell into the river. "That's 'our mill'", he said proudly, and explained how it operated. "George," he said, "is engineer and keeps the paddles turning, I fall and drag the timber to the mill with the bullocks. George then feeds the previously barked logs to the saw while I feed out." Together they selected and racked the sawn timber before cooking their evening meal. "Many settlers are moving into the district," he explained, "so the demand for seasoned, milled timber will grow."

It was a proud and happy man, who pointed to their home a little later just coming into view, as they topped the hill. The horse turned without rein, into the Hyena Rock Road to circle the drive to the house. "You unpack while I get the fire going for a cup of

tea”, he said when he had led her into the house. “Oh! that would be wonderful, I’m parched,” she said, as he carried her travelling basket to the bedroom, already furnished with a varnished blackwood dressing table set with swing-mirrors. A large china bedroom jug, chamber pot and a flower ornamented china wash basin sat on the wash-stand against the other wall. The black enamel-coated iron bedstead with silver trim was topped with an eider-down, and stood in the middle of the high-ceilinged room. “I’ve put the kettle on, I’ll bring some warm water so that you can have a freshen up, as soon as I’ve fed and watered Doll. She is tired too, after that 12 mile trip.” he said and smiled at his wife as he left the room.

He carried the hot water to the room in a large tin dish and she told him that she was just dying for that cup of tea. Only minutes later she had hardly put it to her lips when she looked at it distastefully and said, “Oh it’s horrid.” She felt a distinct chill in the room as her husband quietly explained. “There’s nothing wrong with it, except the water comes off peaty ferric soil and one soon gets used to it.” She thought that he was showing off his knowledge with the use of language, with which she was unfamiliar, and retorted quickly, “I don’t know anything about your ferric stuff. I won’t get used to it, it’s like tobacco water.” His quiet detailed explanation showed his hurt and the woman’s instinct told her to take it carefully. “There is another clear creek on the other side of the hill, but, it drains several cowsheds along the road.” He told her. “I purposely had this water piped to the house because it comes off pristine hills. Yes, it is peaty, but bacteria free,” he explained pompously. She, perhaps wearied from the long journey, resented his attitude but decided to let the matter drop.

On shopping trips to the small centre of Myalla, the road passed through this peaty and ghost-like rocky ridge that out-cropped in an other-wise volcanic residue. This, the Hyena Rock Road, formed the boundary between the volcanic region and that rocky terrain. Our drive swung into the red soil, off this road and wound round the hill up to the house. Mum’s dislike of the ‘ferric’ water that stained her linen, flared one day and she held her soil stained, best table cloth in front of Dad and cried. “Look what you have done.” His reaction was to rush from the house with such bullock-driver’s language that she covered her ears with her apron and took the basket and pegs to the clothes line on the brow of the hill. With a fatalistic sigh she pegged her ‘ruined’ linen securely on the long line before adjusting the clothes props that would ensure that the line caught even a little breeze. Another time she had asked why they couldn’t have a tank, like the Hardman’s?

He had cut her short with, “We have shingles on our roof, they have bloody iron. Flashing and piping can’t be attached to a shingle roof.” The tone of voice indicated

that shingles were somehow superior to bloody iron. Any reference to soil-stained linen, to a tank, or to dirty water to drink, was enough to send our father off with a string of unprintable adjectives.

A sequel to that dirty water episode was enacted at least fifteen years later when back at the Hyena Rocks house, Mum pregnant with her ninth and final child, was sorting through her baby things that had been saved babe after babe and year after year, carefully hoarded in her wicker travelling basket. Her swollen belly and aging figure must have touched Dad's tender spot for he was planning a safe lock-up shed that would be roofed with corrugated iron to which a tank could be attached. A motor saw, on order, would enable him to cut and deliver fire wood to Wynyard where trees were already becoming scarce. This shed would secure the flammable fuel that he would need for the motor-saw, from children who might just have matches. He told us girls, strictly not for Mum's ears, that a tank, some roofing iron, and fitting would be coming out on the cream lorry. We were to hurry home from school, as he needed our help to lift the tank on to the stand that he was building. I could hardly believe that Dad would use that word 'tank.' I had an idea that it was a forbidden word because whenever it had been mentioned in our house there was a tirade from our sire.

We were thrilled to see the heap of shining silver when we arrived from school and fell over each other to help get it all connected. Then we called Mum to come and see. Her delight was infectious and there was celebrating around the dinner table when, in water, we toasted the new tank and Mum and Dad till home work time and were delighted to find that a light shower had fallen during the meal. We children wakened next morning to the most terrible tirade of shouting, swearing and cursing that our young ears had ever heard. We lay there till the door slammed and quiet reigned. Rushing to Mum's room to find out what had happened, we found her sitting there with a 'Mona Lisa' look on her face as she told us "I forgot to move the stone." I raced to the back door and there found the steps awash, not only from the heavy rain that had fallen over-night, but from the new tank, that becoming weighty with water, had been punctured by a piece of sharp blue-stone metal.

"Catch a duckling before you leave for school" she called. "Poor Dad will be hungry, he left without his breakfast. Sitting quietly by the fire after we were all in bed, she had remembered the shower of rain and went to see if any water had entered the tank. She raised one side of the new tank, with a piece of road metal that lay around, and drew off enough clear, lovely rainwater for just one cup of relished, real tea. Enjoying the thought of white linen, she had forgotten to move the stone.

The two children were excited at their new home and the animals, ‘Toby’ the dog, ‘Cherry’ the cow and ‘Jess’ the horse, when Aunt Nell brought Jack and Mary to join their parents at ‘Flowerdale.’ Dancing was really the only community entertainment in that sparsely settled area. Both Mum and Dad loved music and dancing and the two young brats did not interrupt this outing, for the children loved it also. Blankets were placed on the floor of the buggy for the return trip, and the youngsters were simply carried to bed asleep, minus boots. I have heard that as a babe I would sleep right through the dancing tucked up in a shawl behind the piano.

Of course Mum wanted a garden. Fresh flowers and vegetables were only available if one grew them. Planting, fertilizing, and hoeing were all carried out, but what the cow left, the native animals cleaned up over night. A macracarpa pine planted earlier by my father was growing well and later when its huge branches that overhung the Hyena Rock Road were stout enough to hold me, it became my hide-out where, undetected, I could read in peace. Down the slope along the path that led to the main road Mum planted gooseberries, her favourite fruit for pies and jam. The only one that survived was renowned in our family, for every newborn babe over the years, came from under that lone gooseberry bush.

Mary and Jack double-backed ‘Jess’ to school when she as not needed for the buggy. She was corralled in the front paddock at home for easy access in the early morning, and had the lush grass of the school-yard to graze when tethered there. The cow ‘Daisy’ was taken over the main road for grazing where green grass helped provide rich milk for the household. Geranium and lavender were evidently not palatable to domestic or native animals for they were the only two survivors of the flower garden.

Neighbours were all neighbourly, so when Mum told Mrs Walsh, who lived on the top road, that she was afraid that her broody hen was going to leave the setting of prize White Leghorn eggs that she had bought to start off her breed, Mrs Walsh said that there were several broody hens in her yard. Mum could have her pick should the hen decide to go walk-about. Finding the formerly docile breeder full of vim and the eggs losing their warmth, Mum prepared the two children for a walk to Mrs Walsh’s place. They were warned not to play along the way because there were morning sticks to be gathered before Dad returned from work and the cow had to be brought up to the house for milking before dark. Dad was having trouble with the brats’ obedience, or rather with the lack of it. He had promised that if there were no sticks in the morning box ‘tonight’, there would be a strap. The children set off gleefully, Jack with a sugar bag on his shoulder that had a hole cut in one corner for the hen’s head to poke out. “There is a gate,” she called, but

he had already jumped the fence. He buried his bare toes in the hot sand and threw her a kiss.

“Look sis, this is hyena foot prints,” he called to his sister. “You can’t frighten me, you made them with your big toe,” the red headed five years old shrugged. “Well there just might be one there in those big rocks. When I was shooting with Dad we saw bones in a cave over there,” he told her wide eyed. “You would be the one to be scared if there was one, too,” she nonchalantly answered.

“Please, Mrs Walsh, Mum want’s a h-h-hen,” he stuttered as the door opened. “It’s for the eggs in Dad’s shirt near the fire,” his sister offered an explanation. Puzzled, Mrs. Walsh asked, “Didn’t your Mum give you a note.” “Oh yes.” He pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. “I won’t be able to catch her yet,” Mrs. Walsh told them. “You go down and have a play, around the barn. I’ll call you.” “Mrs. Holton’s in there.” Jack told his sister. “How do you know that, smarty?” she quipped. “Because that’s her cart and her horse is tied to the gate. We might get a piece of cake” he hopefully grinned.

They watched as ‘old Cloe’ the ginger bitch suckled her six hairless pups, but began to worry, as the shadow from the barn deepened. They were glad when Mrs. Walsh eventually tucked the docile hen into the bag and they lost no time setting off home for that lonely strip of rock strewn track was an eerie place at dusk and the thought of a waiting strap gave speed to their chubby legs. “You’re pulling me over”, the small one growled as they tugged the bag between them. ”Stop looking behind, that’s what makes you wobble,” he replied, but both took a peep behind as the shadow deepened and the ghostly white rocks stood out menacingly.

They both saw it at once right there beside them and they ran. Bare feet sinking into the deep sand pulled them off balance as they struggled along the gloomy track. When a faint glimmer of light from the kitchen window, assured them that they were almost home they slackened speed and were able to take a breath. Almost into the drive the hen began to squawk and flutter. Looking behind to see why they saw it again. Sharp shiny teeth glittered in the faint moonlight beside them and they, dragging the squawking hen between them, slammed into the kitchen. They threw the hen and bag before their mother and yelled, “A tiger cat chased us.” “You’ll get tiger cat when your father gets home. No cow and no sticks and no wood for the morning”. She left quickly warning them to watch the baby while she milked the cow. When she returned they tried again to tell her about the tiger cat. “I don’t want to hear another word from either of you just get into bed,” was all that she would say. When she had relented a little, with the chores

finished, she took them soup and some bread and jam, but would not let them speak a word. Making up tiger cat stories to cover their disobedience. She was disappointed in them.

The children wakened next morning to hear Dad call, “Come and see Kate the yard is full of feathers.”

Yes, hens limp and cold, lay around the hen house where the faithful hen still sat lifeless on the smashed and mangled eggs. Mary looking hard at her mother cried, “You wouldn’t believe us and now the tiger cat has gone and eaten up our poor hens,” and she burst into tears. “And Mrs. Walsh didn’t give us a cake,” the curly headed one almost cried too.