

THE OLD BROWN FRAME-WORK of the wagons stood like the stark, decrepit remains of naked, dismembered corpses on the edge of the Bus Company's property overlooking the shore. Here at eleven o'clock I sat down with cousin Albert, Boeta and the other big boys, "Happy" Thompson, Jeffy, "Ballie" and Dicky. Sometimes the gang members changed but I was always the youngest and the smallest of the mob sitting on the wagons. Then I delighted in the company and knowledge of the people older than myself.

As soon as the bell rang for the fifteen minutes break we made a dash out of the backyard gate, up the back lane, past Shannon's house which was a converted shop and past the old Phoenix Hall and then down the wide drive-way, past the windows of the Masonic Club and the Villa Zain, with the tall palm in its garden opposite the huge bus garage, until we crossed the open gravel front to the line of wagons.

The wagons were formerly the property of old Albertyn who had a cartage concern down-town. When the wagons were unfit for further use he had them dumped on the foreshore where they were left to the mercy of time and the elements, until they became so battered that they just fell apart through utter weariness from the unevenness of the battle.

Old Albertyn's house stood on the edge of the shore almost surrounded by its big garden, which was densely overcrowded with plants and trees growing in wild confusion and disorder, giving it a somewhat mysterious appearance from whichever side one looked at it. The garden was dominated by tall blue-gums which cast a perpetual shade over the place, making each tree assume a gloomy, sulky mood of unhappiness in the sepia and olive-green shadows. Only when a strong wind blew the sea's expanse into hundreds of restless waves, which the white sea horses rode on, up and down, up and down, and the sky into masses of dark grey and blue rain clouds and whipped the beach sand up over the wagons and the dust along the gravel front, only then did those trees appear to be gay. Then the stiff cypresses lifted up their heavy green foliage and the oleanders along the fence shook their cake-pink and ivory-white flowers and waxy leaves to and fro, to and fro, and the banana palms clashed their torn leaves against each other and against the branches of other trees, noisy like a noisy child, glad for the wind that came up off the sea like a small hurricane and gave it a voice, while the long yellow rods of bamboo that were tipped with leaves like green daggers, swayed and swayed from side to side, up, down, up, down, its humble sideways creak soft beneath the groans and sighs of the blue-gums. When the wind ran through the corners of that garden beneath those trees and between those bushy plants it stole scenty fragrances from each plant, particularly the roses and oleanders, and tossed

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PETER CLARKE

Eleven O'clock the Wagons the Shore

A Story

it to us and anybody willing to wait along its fences to smell them.

WE SAT ON THE TATTERED remains of the wagons, rocking to and fro in the wind, munching the eleven o'clock slices of 'tuppenny' loaves, feeling them become doughy and 'goeey' as it mixed with spittle, butter and apricot jam, hesitating on the brink of the throat into which it sank unwillingly with each difficult swallow.

Along the edge of the crumpled bread-paper the sea licked, spat and spumed, depositing foam and sea-weed and old bread and broken planks. Off the shore-line the fishing boats tugged restlessly at their anchors and over the dock-wall we could see the big war-ships greyly riding at attention.

With our hands clutching the splintered side-beams of our wagons, we let our eyes follow along the white flight of sea-gulls as they swept along the alleys of the sky-lanes, sweeping, banking, hovering, swooping down to collect juicy tit-bits of soggy bread, swollen orange and lonely cast-off stool and when the sea showed promise of nothing they sat and waited expectantly with the patience of a reception committee on the end of the sanitation pipe, until at long intervals it poured off dribbles of refuse. Then they dropped their white fig-bodies into the tossing waters, bundling each other out of the way, so as to peck at the morsels they fancied to be the best.

We and the other schoolboys called them 'skollyboys' because they were always 'skollying' for something to eat. But the wagon kids were the only boys who tried to recognise certain gulls every day. Sometimes we succeeded and then we watched our particular 'Joey' or 'Pat' or 'Bill' flying about until bored with his surroundings he would let a finger of wind lift him under each wing-tip and transport him on a fast, smooth ride towards the town pier, the fishing boats, the big yachts, the tugs and over the black iron boundary fence of the old dock-yard, while our minds whispered furiously 'Goodbye Joe, goodbye Joe, see you tomorrow again', as our bird flew away and the distance changed it into a tiny white speck. Then, there was always tomorrow and the bell . . .

When the days were wintry and eleven o'clock dry, we leant on the weathered timbers of the wagons and watched the mists of distant rains flushing the faces of the coastal mountains, hugging the outline of the bay, washing out the colour of mountain, sea and sky the way water washes out the tints of a delicate watercolour painting; coming nearer and nearer until, running hard for shelter, we felt it licking at our heels. Those were far, far rains and we wondered if they had come to us

Our minds
whispered furiously
'Good-bye Joe' . . .

all the way from the forests and jungles of the Equator. Watching, you could see it miles and miles away up country as it came along and it made one wonder.

Sometimes, smack in the middle of winter we got a clear day with an icy nip on its edge, sharp, like the sharp point of a knife gently prodding the palm of the hand. On those 'turned-up collar' days, with hands stuck deep in pockets and taste of bread and sugary toffee in mouths, we stood on the beach and looked across, over the fortress forms of Royal Navy ships, to the blue mountains far away on the other side of the bay, their peaks and crests and ravines dazzling white and dusty blue with a fall of snow. Then we became envious. 'It would be nice if snow fell in the peninsula for a change then we could have real snow-fights. Pity though, there would be sand on the snow-balls if we battled in the school-yard', said cousin Albert.

THERE WAS JUST A CHANCE after the eleven o'clock bread, the wagons, and toes in the sea, to run between buildings to have a quick look at the horses in Albertyn's stables and the blacksmith next door. We knew those horses because after school we say them in the street pulling the loaded wagons through the town and when they stopped, the driver allowed us to touch them, which we did with the tips of our timid fingers.

The blacksmith's shop, with its excessive heat and bright, fiery red and pitch, pitch black and hard brown iron that was changed into white-hot iron, was always a source of delight. Our wonder made it a place of magic and the blacksmith a magician. But one day he shouted at us as we stood in the doorway and was turned into an ordinary man of ordinary flesh and blood and muscle with the vagaries of an ordinary human temperament. And we ran from reality, back to school, past the back windows of the garage in which the bulky bodies of the buses slumbered, elephant-like, in the deep gloominess, because in the distance we could hear the bell . . .

In the warm months of the first butterflies, we watched the daisies lightly sprinkling themselves, white and lemon and orange, between the sharp blades of grass in the lee of the petrified springs and rusted iron bands of the wagon timbers. Between poles the red hands of fishermen blooded thin cords of black fishline the length of the grassy beach and, halfway up the sand, stink barnacles fell from the edge of scrapers, off the hulls of snoek vessels home from the Walvis Bay coast's winter fishing. The dark holds of those vessels had borne dried snoek, stacked one on top of the other, their flayed bodies stiff with the glittering crystal-like salt; and bulging bags of delicious 'butter-pits' garnered

from the insides of a melon of the hot South West Africa desert-land. When the snoek-catchers came home after the winter's fishing the boys of the mission school sat in class and cracked the husks of the 'pits' while the grumpy schoolmaster had his back turned.

On the warmer days we explored the territories left vacant by the ebb-tide and caught the small grey-brown and grey-black mottled rockfish known in our home language as 'Klipvissies'. Some of the larger of those fish, caught in the rock pools with a penny hook tied to a piece of tough string, found their way into frying pans and were eaten at suppertime. And when the wind put tight fingers between the rocks and pushed the tide up into our pools we retreated to the dryness of higher ground and listened to the rasping voice of the date-palm, in the garden of the Villa Zain, clattering its dagger-leaved branches together outside the tightly closed windows of the white and green villa.

Those were far, far days and now it is all over. Time has taken many hours and changed them into the past. Bare-footed schoolboys grew up and became men, and the wagons disappeared beneath the reclaimed land of a new fore-shore. Only the sea and the wind remain. Now when the sea roars and the wind rises up off the water, and, dashing through the corners of old Albertyn's garden makes every plant and tree rejoice, then my heart goes back to those far-off eleven o'clock days of the wagons and the sea. ●

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