

## **Chapter XII: 1926 – the Kilburn Sisters, Parkerville Home, and how it worked; Edgar's proposal; a trip back to England, then marriage at Parkerville in 1929**

New Year 1926. It was the first Watchnight Service I had ever attended. It was in St Luke's Church, Mosman Park, known then as Cottesloe Beach. I prayed for some guidance, some sight of what to do with my life. Almost the next day I read in the paper that someone was needed to take charge of a cottage at Parkerville Home.

Mother, Margaret and I had visited Parkerville Home on the annual Open Day and Fete. We had gone up by special train to Parkerville Station, and then in a kind of covered wagon we were driven up the steepest road through the bush. We were a mixed bunch of laughing women and children being jogged up into the Darling Range. As we approached the main entrance, the State school and hall were on our left and the office on our right. This was Sister Madeleine's world. Here this thin, ageless, North Country woman ruled as secretary, treasurer and keeper of the books. Apart from this office, the chapel was her care and she managed to get some sound out of the aged harmonium. Her chief headache was keeping Sister Kate from over-spending, or taking in more children than they could afford.

Then there was the very beautiful and unique little chapel with its brick sanctuary and round, clear glass east window, with a view of the bush beyond. As well as the school recreation ground there was another sort of village green among the cottages where the children would play after school, surrounded by shaded seats.

There were stalls and sideshows everywhere and you could visit any of the cottages. They seemed to have delightful names like 'Babyland' and 'Daisy'.

We couldn't find Sister Kate anywhere; one or two sisters we approached were up for the day from Perth College and they didn't know where she was either.

A little girl of about 11, called Mercy, asked us if we would like to see her cottage. This was 'Daisy' cottage and was the prettiest little bungalow you could wish to see. Inside, the cottage was full of flowers, books and friendliness, and an elderly white cocky in an enormous cage who greeted us by shouting, in a good army officer's voice, 'Hello! Scratch Cocky!' We laughingly did just that and so he sang 'Pop goes the weasel!' It appeared no one knew how old he was; he spent his time wandering around the garden getting into mischief, but he didn't like crowds and he *hated* donkeys. If he saw one he would screech and screech until someone came to put him in his cage. There were several children in the cottage and they offered to make us a cup of tea. Then Mercy sang 'Won't you buy my pretty flowers?' The children told us that 'Daisy' cottage was Sister Kate's. We never found her, but we did find such a wonderful spirit of love and happiness that we would not have thought possible in an orphanage. There were hundreds of children about, but it was impossible to tell which belonged to the Home.

To understand how Parkerville was born we must go back to the foundation of the Kilburn Sisters. Around 1850, in a number of the best Victorian homes, were born baby girls who would change a great deal of the social habits and laws, and begin the real education of women. Their efforts were all the more astounding when one realizes that they were brought up in a narrow system of life, the goal of which was to be decorative, obedient wives and breeders of children. We all know of Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth Fry and Mrs Pankhurst. Maybe some of us have heard of Miss Beale. She founded the first *real* school of learning for young ladies – Cheltenham Ladies' College. In those days, a young lady did not walk alone in the street, so how could she possibly do social work?

In Kilburn, an Anglican Sisterhood was formed and included a number of 'teenagers' – among them was Sister Kate; she was just 19. Their parents could not refuse them the right to do this. Once they were in the Sisterhood they could work in the slums of London, particularly with the children. 'Waifs', they were called, a word which Sister Kate particularly hated. The Kilburn Sisters always had two aims: one was the better education of women, the other the care of parentless children. In 1901, some of the sisters came to WA to found schools for girls. They thought it would be a good idea to bring out some children from the slums to this new country, using the profits from the school to help keep them.

I feel I must just mention Sister Vera, although she has little to do with the Parkerville story. The 'advance sisters' felt they needed the wonderful personality of Sister Vera to help them, so they sent for her, begging her to come. She was middle-aged, she had only a quarter of a lung left, and the doctors gave her six months to live. It would take her two to get to WA. She came in 1907. In 1926 the foundation stone of the Perth College chapel was laid. The next year, 1927, Sister Vera wrote to England saying that she felt her life's work was complete. Before the letter reached England (there was no airmail in those days) she had died in her sleep – over 20 years later than she was predicted to die!

To get back to Parkerville. In 1903 Sister Kate brought 11 girls and 11 boys from London to begin an orphanage in WA. The sisters were struggling to make their school pay and still people wanted an education for their girls. Some sisters went up to the goldfields and it was thought that, if the little girls went up too with Sister Sarah, it might solve the problem. They were all very poor up there, but Sister Sarah told me that the people of the goldfields were wonderful to them. They not only gave them clothing, but often food as well. Sister Jane and Sister Kate bought a piece of almost virgin bush on a hill north of Parkerville Station. Through the bush it was about a mile. They whitewashed a line of trees so that they could find their way down. There were two little cowsheds on the block; the sisters took the 11 boys and they built their first cottage.

When it rained they had to put tins under the holes in the roof of the sheds. Just pause for a moment and think of these two women of gentle birth, struggling with life in this big timberland bush. All their food and supplies had to be carried up that steep hill over rough country, worried all the way by flies and ants. They had wood, of course, and water from the stream. Then they had to build their own toilets, etc. When a proper cottage had been established, Sister Sarah and the girls joined them. They were still very poor and still other children joined the home – motherless children whose fathers often brought them as tiny babies on horseback. They would pay for them for a few months, or even years, and then disappear.

People around Perth would donate food and clothing from time to time. Once the sisters paid ten shillings for a bag. When they opened it it was full of old boots! The railwaymen were so upset that they arranged that *anything* donated to Parkerville Home was to go free on the railway.

Once a year, at that time of the year when the Darling Range was a carpet of wild flowers, the Parkerville Home Day would be held. Special trains were run and all the churches and GFS, etc, would have stalls, side-shows and teas. Not only was it a wonderful day's outing, but also a great deal of money was made. In the 1920s the Home had reached its peak: all the public was behind it. Over 400 children had passed through the Home and made good citizens. The boys from England went to the war, all but one who was a spastic; only half of them came back. A glass case in the chapel housed their medals and photos. The brick sanctuary was built with the money they sent. When I remarked one day to Sister Kate how I loved the plain glass of the round window over the altar, she said that the picture had been so ugly she had refused to put it in. Now the bush beyond was so beautiful, the window would always remain clear.

In the winter, motor cycling clubs would come up and run races, etc, for the children – with lollies as prizes. Toc H would come up and mend all the windows. Of course, at that time, all the cottages were weatherboard – even the new one, 'Claremont'.

Sister Ruth, the only Australian sister, was in charge of the older boys, between 12 years and leaving school. Most days she took children to Perth for one reason or another – dentist, hospital... In those days pictures [cinema] were continuous (all day) and she was allowed to take her little brood in free. This helped a great deal as there were few trains to Parkerville.

Sister Sarah had charge of the cottage where all the 'old' boys and those others working on the farm lived, but she slept and had her room in the 'big' girls' cottage. This had a number of cubicles in one part and the verandah, which surrounded the cottage, was full of beds. Girls who attended schools in Midland and Perth, and maybe Perth College, lived there and any old girls coming up for the weekend slept there too.

'Nurse' was in charge of the cottage called 'Hospital'. It was really where one or two tiny tots lived who were too young to go to kindergarten, for any child who was ill, as well as for a little

blind boy called Ronnie. 'Padbury' had Miss Lefroy for house-mother, 'Babyland' a widow called Mrs Noble, and 'Rosemary' an 'old girl' – Netta. May Holt had come to the Home when she was a few weeks old, had gone through school and Perth College, trained as a kindergarten teacher, and now ran the kindergarten.

There was another cottage comprising eight rooms back-to-back, each opening on to a verandah. Here little old ladies lived who were on a pension. Their midday meal was sent up from the main kitchen and they drew rations for the other meals like everyone else. They lived rent-free. They were supposed to do little jobs for some of the cottages. One or two of them liked to play chess with each other. They thought Sister Kate should have some relaxation and would invite her to come down for the evening. Sister Kate would often make some excuse and send me instead. I had long, busy days but I knew how much they looked forward to these social evenings, even though I had great difficulty in keeping awake between the moves. The trouble was that, if you went to one, you had to treat the others the same.

Not all eight had little old ladies – only one side. The other side housed helpers who worked in the kitchen and laundry. One was a deaf-and-dumb widow and her little girl. It was wonderful how she could make us understand and how she understood us. At that time, I wore my long hair in two 'earphones' over my ears. If this widow wanted to ask about me, she would make a ring around her ears, then with one hand would indicate waves of the sea, meaning that I was English and came from over the sea. Sometimes I would very carefully spell out a word in deaf-and-dumb language and she would be very excited at my efforts, but we all came to learn that it was much quicker to use her own signs.

The washing was done in the laundry, but each cottage did their own ironing. The housemothers had a helper above school age, sometimes a teenager, sometimes an unmarried mother with her baby.

The Home was one of the few places in WA, then, where a mother could have her baby with her. If she left Parkerville, the baby came under the State and she had no control over it. Neither did Sister Kate. In other words, when they reached school-leaving age they could only go farming if a boy or do domestic work if a girl. Many times when a parent, or relations, had ceased to pay for a child, Sister Kate would not put them under the State for that very reason, so that a child with a particular talent had the opportunity to follow it.

Every day, rations were drawn from the store-room. These were for breakfast, which was cooked in the cottages, and 'pieces' – a round of bread and jam (while it lasted), golden syrup or beef dripping – for mid-morning and after school in the afternoon and, of course, things like tea, sugar, soap, etc. Milk was delivered by the farm boys – Sister Kate always wished they had more cows as she felt the younger children did not have as much milk as she would have liked.

There was a special cottage where 'Aunt' lived. She had been a housemother for years. She told me that when she was 50, she suddenly felt that long hours with children made her evil towards them and she was very upset about this. After discussing it with her doctor, it was decided that she should take on the duties of an 'aunt'.

Part of her cottage was a clothes store-room. All garments that came in were sorted and altered ready for children so that a housemother could take a child along and get her or him fitted out. Another part of her cottage was a toy and game section. When it was someone's birthday, she would be told: she would make, or was given, lollies to give out. At Christmas, she made a parcel for each child with its name on it. In this way she did a wonderful job – saw the children but did not have them with her all the time.

When I saw the notice in the paper, I wrote at once telling of Sister Angela and Sister Frances in Eastcombe. My one fear was that I was too young. I had a reply at once and within a few days I was at Parkerville Station, being met by the cart which always met the few trains from Perth each day. I was dreading Sister Kate – for some reason her name frightened me.

The cart pulled up by the entrance and in the shade of a tree stood a Sister in a grey habit. I thought she must be a novice or something because I knew the Kilburn Sisters wore black habits. It was Sister Kate, but I didn't find this out until later in the day – and she was just as frightened of

me. (It appeared I looked so very English, she didn't think I would be any good.) She took me to a larger cottage called 'Padbury' where Miss Ruth Lefroy (known to everyone as 'Friend') was in charge. She said she wanted me to help Miss Lefroy and, after introducing us, she fled.

Miss Lefroy said her great trouble this time of day was keeping the children clean after their baths. She shooed us on to the back verandah. I played a game trying to remember their names as they came from their baths. There was one large girl of 13, called Rita. Nowadays, we would say she was mentally retarded and would put her in a special home, but this was the only place that would have her then. Her face would have made a gargoyle look handsome and she talked very indistinctly out of the side of her mouth. She was very polite and always came forward saying 'I am Rita. How do you do?' She lived in 'Padbury' because she adored Friend and would obey her. Friend was the only one who could make her keep to her diet so that she did not have fits. Alas for me, it soon became apparent that as she was devoted to Friend more than anyone in the world, I was only a good second-best.

I have always been able to (what I call) play children by ear. That is, I have an inborn understanding and discipline. I know it is a gift and I have felt very sad that sometimes, for years on end, I was not able to use this gift as much as I would have liked to have done. The rest of that first day was quite full and I discovered that the Sister had been Sister Kate and that they wore grey habits in the hot weather in the Home.

In the morning, coming out of my room, the nearest cot to my door was an old-fashioned iron thing, which had seen many better days, and would swing at every movement. Inside was a little girl – small for her age, she was about four and a half - called Enid. She was crying as if her heart would break with terror: she had messed the bed and the smell was terrible. 'Here we go,' I thought, and set to work to clean it all up. I was told this often happened. Later in the morning I came dashing out of the bathroom (which was a corner of the back verandah) to go to the toilet with a full chamber pot when I nearly bumped into Sister Kate. I was a bit put out but she almost grinned as she passed on. She told me weeks afterwards that when she saw me with the pot in my hand, she knew I would do.

I believe I was only at 'Padbury' for two weeks but it seemed much longer; so much seemed to happen every day. Not only the life in the cottage, each cottage was like a family except that there was no father. Breakfast was cooked in the cottage, but it was not practical for other meals. These were cooked in a central kitchen and sent up to be served by the 'mother' or one of her helpers. On Sundays a light tea was sent up at lunch-time, ready for the evening meal. The children had a bath every day, which meant heating water up in 'kero' tins on the wood stove. There were bathrooms, but no hot water. The laundry was sent down to a central laundry in the Home, but ironed in the cottages with flat irons, mostly by the bigger girls.

The children all had a roster of little jobs to do; even the kindergarten children would help set the tables and gather small chips of wood to light the fire. The boys loved it when they were old enough to have their own axe and chop wood; they were then one up on the other boys who were only allowed to carry it. In the same way, the eldest girls cooked the breakfast and, when the senior girl allowed them to cook some fritters, they had really become cooks. I changed my rosters on a fortnightly period so that their jobs were not always the same. They were all able to be done long before school-time, so that the rest of the day was their own, except for those who washed up or fetched the meals.

Miss Ruth Lefroy was a wonderful person. She was one of the forgotten army of unmarried daughters which every Victorian family took care they possessed. The unsung heroines of the era. The Victorians had large families as an investment – the poor as children to work for them, the rich so that they had sons to inherit and daughters to marry off successfully. As Mother always was on her back for one reason or another, it was good to have one daughter to run the family, under Papa's rule, of course. When both parents had departed this life, poor Auntie was often a semi-invalid herself. Miss Lefroy was a spinster aunt. When she was about 10 or 11, she and another little girl were sent to England to be educated. They were put in the charge of a young curate for the journey, but he wasn't in evidence very much and they were so seasick they wished they could die. Her

relations in England became so fond of her, particularly her grandmother, that she stayed there for 20 years. When she came back, she nursed her mother until she died.

Some time while in Europe, she went on the Siberian railway with her clerical brother. It must have been very rough indeed – I think it was about the turn of the century – she was very shocked that she had had to share a sleeping compartment with her brother. After her mother died, Miss Lefroy wanted to become a missionary, but her doctor said that her health had been so undermined by spending so many hours in stuffy sick rooms, she was not strong enough. He also told her that it was no good her trying another way – he would stop her leaving Australia. He then added that if she wanted to do something with her life, she should go to the Parkerville Home and help the sisters. She told me all this and looked upon me as another of her many nieces.

Miss Lefroy was tall and thin and with such thin, white skin you could often see her veins. There was not one bit of colour about her – even her hair and lips were white. She was so flat-footed her feet were almost at right angles and she wore very thick glasses. She always seemed to wear pale greys or blues and she really looked like a walking ghost. But we all loved her. Sometimes she would say such funny things out of the corner of her mouth with a poker-face expression. With her skin, she never moved in the sun without an umbrella. One day, she was trying to hold it a little over me, remarking as she did so that I should be careful not to fall over her feet! Then she said she thought that when people saw her coming, they must think she was quite mental she looked so queer! At mealtimes, she would short-sightedly peer at her knife or fork to see if it was washed properly. Once she remarked that she was always afraid she would subconsciously do this when she was visiting and people would be shocked at her peering at their silver.

Sister Kate's great cross was visitors. She had no small talk and all that goes with the type of visitors to children's homes. Here, Miss Lefroy came to her aid and she, herself, came alive. She had special tea things tucked away; she would sit and entertain them and escort them around the home, and they would go away happy. Poor Miss Lefroy – she could not understand the world since 1914. The way of life – it left her stunned. She would not vote because she might do wrong; she was far too honest to muddle her voting paper, so after each polling day she would send her two guineas (the fine for not voting). Sex – she was a spinster – was a dirty word to her.

In December 1928, I was staying in her new cottage, 'Claremont'. My future husband had lent me one of Dr Marie Stopes's books, very modern for that time. One of her old girls, who was the same age as me, was also getting married and I lent her the book. Miss Lefroy heard us talking about it and thought she would like to read it as it had been written by a doctor. I don't think she read more than a few pages before she gave it back to me, very disgusted. This girl, by the way, told her boyfriend about it and found that he had read it. She was very disgusted that men knew all about these books and not girls.

Ruth and Yelma Noble, the two daughters of the first aboriginal to be ordained a deacon, had been sent down to Perth to be educated into our way of life. Since they were black, Parkerville Home was the only place that would have them. Ruth was about 15 or 16, tall and very beautiful, unlike most native women. Yelma was just 13, shorter and top heavy, like most of her tribe. They had only been in the home a few weeks when I met them. They had their meals with Friend and myself so that they could learn table manners. They were very shy and rather frightened of Friend. I was very interested in the girls; I had just been reading about three very clever habits they had in their daily life as aborigines. At the first mealtime, I began to discuss these habits with them and they forgot to be shy and afraid. Friend was just amazed and wanted to know why they hadn't told her about all these things. Ruth soon became friends with Miss Lefroy and they began to understand each other. But I am afraid Yelma was always a thorn in her side; they were just not on the same wavelength.

The nearest cottage to 'Padbury' was a little old wood and mud place with a verandah at one end, joining it to a small kitchen and bathroom that had been added on. It was called 'Lodge' because, at first, it was the chapel and then the school, before the Government school was built. It was the least pretty cottage in the home and not very happy inside. There was a long living room where the children had meals when the weather was too bad to eat on the verandah. Running

alongside was a dormitory. At the end of the living room was a room for the house mother, a linen room and, beside it, a smaller dormitory for the few bigger girls.

The children there seemed a motley lot. Some were what we now call 'new Australians'. One or two of the little boys were frightful looking; there was one pleasant half-caste boy and a really black, little, curly-headed boy of about five, called Wally, who always seemed to be in a temper – he would kick the trees with his bare feet, swearing all the time. I had never heard swearing before and, when I went home for the weekend, I had to find out from Mother what the words meant.

Sister Kate came to me one morning and asked me to take charge of 'Lodge'. I was horrified and said I couldn't do that – they were such horrid little boys, etc, etc. Sister Kate said they were such a sad little family because they had never had anyone to really take care of them and love them, and there were only 12 of them. (So there were, at first.)

I knew that life was much too easy at 'Padbury' and that I was wasted, so I moved in. Sister Kate said that the eldest girl, who really mothered the family, was a moody girl, but if I could win her over she would make the others behave. I did not have to 'win over' Millie – from the very beginning she not only adored me, I could do no wrong. She was always so reliable and we never had cross words.

After a month, Sister Kate sent me home for the weekend and said she, herself, would look after them all in 'Lodge'. When I came back, she was delighted with the whole tone of the cottage and said that they didn't seem like the same children at all; they had all blossomed out in different ways. She then asked me if I would have a couple of brothers from Miss Lefroy's cottage (she, Sister Kate, always liked to keep brothers and sisters together, if she could). I told her I would rather have that little girl, Enid. Sister Kate was amazed: she remarked that she was such a funny little thing, always crying and messing the bed, but if I wanted her I could have her.

First, I will talk of taming Wally, the little black boy. His tempers were caused by two things – if he was overtired, and if the boys made fun of him (or he thought they did). I tried to make sure that he didn't get tired. If the boys got him into a temper because they loved to see the fun of him swearing, etc, I said I would punish them. That soon stopped that! Kindergarten had not gone back after the holidays so Wally was playing by himself. He would look up and see that I was around and I would smile at him. To everyone's great amazement he called me 'Mummy' – he was a very happy little boy. When kindergarten started again, he would sometimes get into a temper with one of the children. May Holt, the teacher, would bring him up the hill to 'Lodge' and you could hear his yelling all over the home. I would say 'Oh Wally!', take him by the hand, lead him straight into the dormitory and up into his cot, then I would say, very firmly, 'Wally! Stop crying, *stop!*' At first, he said 'Me can't!' I knew at least he was trying, but I wouldn't leave him until he had. He would fall asleep then and I would watch him for the next few days, perhaps keep him home one or two afternoons to sleep in his cot.

'No,' I told 'Padbury', 'I don't want Enid's cot – I have a spare one.' The first night Enid messed the bed, from habit, but never afterwards. The cot did not swing and she wasn't frightened. I took her to Aunt and we got her a whole new outfit of clothes which I altered to fit her, if necessary. I washed and brushed her hair until it shone in gentle waves. Because she no longer cried, her nose was no longer red and running; she began to smile and was pretty. Because she was so small, the big girls began to take her about in their arms. She became their mascot and they nicknamed her 'Peanut' for some reason. From then on she was known as Peanut. Wally took a liking to her too. She was accepted into the family and her life became normal.

The children talked about another kindergarten child who was away, but would return. Her name was Rennie. Sure enough, one day Rennie returned and my heart sank, for if there was ever an odd man out, it was Rennie. To begin with there were now three little ones; this meant that someone had to give way about holding my hand, etc. Next it was obvious that the others didn't care for Rennie much. She was a born moaner. She was rather a round child with a very fair, pink and white skin, big sorrowful blue eyes, and such a smattering of very fair, straight hair that she looked almost bald. The bigger girls gave the small ones their daily bath and they were told to send

Rennie to me with her brush and comb so that I could coax the faint strands to turn into curls.

One of my very strict points was that the children should be polite, saying 'please', 'thank you', and 'may I', etc. I remember one day, when Rennie had apparently been having an extra special 'time' with whoever had been bathing her, she thought she had better not get on the wrong side of me too. She came very tearfully to me, clutching her brush and comb, and said 'Please, may you do my hair?' I was never able to get through her ring of loneliness and unwantedness. It is frightful to think that a child of five had been so hurt.

There was another incident with Rennie. The kindergarten children came home earlier in the afternoon than the others and often they had a rest in their cots. One afternoon a young woman, only a girl really, came to the door and asked if she could see Rennie. I was a bit worried because it was not the weekend when most visitors came. I said that I thought she might be asleep. The girl said that if she was, not to disturb her. As I went to look (I felt she must be Rennie's mother), I saw Sister Madeleine pass the window, so I kept out of sight for a while. I hear Sister Madeleine tearing strips off the girl saying that she had seen her steal past the office, even though she knew that she should not visit Rennie without first calling in at the office. She went on to say that the child might be dead and buried for all the girl knew: how she thought that she had done her duty by the child by visiting once in about six months with a bag of lollies, etc, etc. Then she added, gruffly (which meant that she was really sorry for the poor girl) that since she was here she might as well see the child, but it wouldn't happen again. That was my cue to appear with Rennie. The trouble was that, officially, these girls were supposed to be paying something towards their children's food and clothing; unofficially, this girl was not and Sister Kate, as I have said, would not inform the State.

In the 1920s there were two great trials at the home – bugs and head lice. Some years before, when weatherboard houses from the goldfields were being sold cheaply, the sisters bought one. The houses were taken to pieces and reassembled. This house was brought down, complete with a whole army of bugs. When the house was assembled and the family moved in, the darling bugs came out of the walls and into the wooden stretchers and that was the start of it. I don't know what they did with the house – whether they burnt it or what.

By way of the beds they were soon all over the home, so when we knew there were some about we had 'operation bugs' every week. The beds were stripped and boiling water was poured along the cracks in the head and tails where the mesh joined. The smell of dying bugs was frightful! The water had to be *boiling* or, as Friend said, it only hatched them instead of killing them. 'Lodge' was a frightful place for them as its walls were mud and wood, so they came out for any strangers to see.

Head lice were still a problem. Periodically a child with a dirty head would come up to the home and it did not take long before each cottage became infected. Every day, after lunch, everyone lined up to be fine-tooth-combed. I had some very pretty girls in my cottage, one with thick, long, black curly hair and two with fair hair. When I had finished them, I had to do my own mass of hair too. It would take about a month to get them all clear. There was a family of six whose mother had died and, one Christmas, their relations had them home for the holidays. They all came back with dirty heads. Sister Kate saw red and sent them all back to their relations, with instructions that they should get their heads cleaned before they sent them back.

Although we had no flyscreens on the doors or windows or the earth toilets, we didn't seem to be worried too much with flies. The cottages were kept very clean; the floors were all wood. Verandahs as well, and they were mopped with disinfectant water, as were the toilets.

At first it was a problem what to call me, apart from Miss Waite (which soon turned into Swaite). The helpers called me 'Waity'. I was not old enough for the children to call me 'Mum' and there were the sisters – Aunt and Friend. One morning, Sister Sarah found me sorting out the boys' trousers which had just come back from the laundry. 'Look at Wendy!' she said, 'with all the lost boys' trousers!' That was it – for ever I was known as Wendy.

Sister Sarah (whom most of the 'old' boys and girls called Lalla) except for her love of children was almost the exact opposite of Sister Kate. They were wonderful friends: they had complete understanding with each other and complemented each other. Even in looks they were

different. Sister Sarah was small and dainty, so small she ran everywhere. She had a naughty, mischievous, Irish face, tiny hands, feet and waist, only because her face was covered with fine, tiny lines like a net pattern did you know that she was old. Her voice was soft and cuddly, yet she could manage the most unruly boy. She did all the social duties for Sister Kate. They would laugh together at the way people referred to them as 'sweet' Sister Sarah and the 'formidable' Sister Kate. When people needed a straight talk for some reason, or a difficult matter had to be settled, they would resolve the matter together, but it was Sister Kate who carried it out. For some reason, even though I was young enough to be their granddaughter, I was often in on these conferences as well as during the relaxing periods – Sister Sarah was very musical. At that time, she was beginning to feel her age, I think, and retired to bed early. Sister Kate retired to her bed early, too, but she read nearly all night.

Annie Baldwin, one of the original girls from England, would pay Sister Kate a visit sometimes. She was a great tonic – she could be so funny! Sister Kate would laugh so much, tears would run down her face. She would take off her cape, then her collar, because she was so hot from laughing. I got to know Annie quite well when I was staying with my people at Cottesloe Beach. I joined the St Luke's GFS as an Associate, the idea being that, when I returned to Parkerville after recovering from scarlet fever, I would form a branch there. The very first day, Annie was told to introduce me to everyone. In a poker-faced, straight-laced way she was a natural cockney comic.

On any bright, early winter afternoon, a child would bring me a note from Sister Kate on his way to afternoon school. It would suggest that I leave my three 'babies' with Miss Lefroy and, when the others came out from school, they grab their 'pieces' and we all go to the waterfalls (now part of Parkerville Open Air Theatre). Her cottage and my cottage, and any 'hangers-on', would race ahead like little dogs – there probably would be dogs as well.

Sister Kate and I would discuss everything under the sun – whether a child was better off in a bad home or an institution, how kindergarten helped a child when the mother was not naturally observant and taught the child all manner of things before school years; how much life was hereditary or environmental...

Returning from one of these walks it was getting quite dark as we entered the home. All but one boy and one dog had shot off ahead; one of the bigger boys was coming towards us with a hurricane lamp and informed us that the six children had arrived! Sister Kate asked 'What six children?' and he named a young family not long out from England, whose mother was very ill in hospital. Sister Kate protested that she hadn't any beds, only to be told that the beds were at the station. All the big girls were nursing the six beautifully snowy-haired children. I cried that I would like a couple! Sister Kate shooed me off, telling me that I had enough now! I had – my number was 17 – five boys (including Wally), three sisters, two sisters and a brother, and a sister and brother as well as a few odd ones like Enid, Rennie, and a terribly ugly boy whose mouth I had washed out with hard soap once to stop him swearing. He did, too, and all the others as well.

Then there was the sunny, happy, lovable quarter-caste Billy. He didn't know, then, that he had coloured blood. I remember one evening watching cricket on the village green and Sister Sarah smilingly remarked that Billy was the 'whitest' boy in the home. He was such a wonderful influence on the others. Neither of us could know what would happen in about ten years' time, when she was dead. I was in England and Sister Kate had been sent away as too old to run the home. Billy, being a State boy, had been sent out as a farm labourer and, discovering what the world called him, he threw himself out of a train and was killed.

Wally was just that much younger so that, when he grew up, he was in time for the war. The authorities were proud to send a handsome, full-blooded native to war. I met Wally when he was a man of about 45 – his curls were snow-white and he had the same happy smile. He was a good man at his trade in Midland. He never married but gave all his spare time to the native boys and their football. It seemed to me that he had been a good citizen. He died a couple of years later.

There was another really wonderful day Sister Kate and I had. It shows the complex side of her character and understanding it. It was the spring holidays and Sister Kate thought it would be fun to take 50 of the older children on (what we would now call) a hike to Mundaring Weir. We



were to leave about ten in the morning, each taking a packed lunch, walk across country to Mundaring and take a train to the Weir. Some of the helpers prepared the lunches and Sister Kate chose the children who would be old enough for the walk. I made arrangements for those of mine left behind – I expect Friend took care of them. Off we set. After a while we realized that one of Sister Kate's lovely black collies had decided to come too. We didn't worry – we talked of this and that. When we got to Mundaring Station we found we couldn't take the dog on the train without a lead. Somehow, I discovered a piece of string in my pocket, so we tied him up with that and took him on the train.

The train pulled in on high land on the Museum side of the Weir – that was the side one approached in those days. (There was no Museum then.) Below the Weir was a safe place to paddle and off the children dashed. We discovered that most of the boys had eaten their lunch on the way and were now starving! Sister Kate sent a couple of the bigger girls up to the little shop to buy a long loaf and a tin of jam (would they open the tin for her and lend her a knife?) and we cut 'pieces'.

When we were left alone, Sister Kate did one of her 'walking about and thinking' exercises. It was the after-life that time, that and the fact that, try as she had all these years, she had never been able to love the Australian bush like the English countryside. By the time the train took us back to Mundaring, it was late afternoon and Sister Kate said the children were thirsty. She went to the hotel and asked the publican's wife if she would make a bucket of cool drink for the children and lend us a couple of mugs. She did more than that – she took Sister Kate and me into her lounge and gave us a cup of tea. The sun was beginning to set and Sister Kate thought the walk back was a bit much. Leaving me with the children she went off (into the hotel itself, I think) to find someone with a truck to take us to the home. She came back with a couple of men with a truck who said they would take us back for ten shillings. There was just room for Sister Kate in the front and we all climbed in the back, including the dog on his string. The road was corrugated and often rough, and the children sort of hummed to the jiggling and jumping. Sometimes the dog thought he saw a rabbit or something and tried to take off over us all, but someone always managed to grab the string before he really did take off. The children began singing the songs of the day. It was a really delightful experience; it would appear the men thought so too because, when we reached the home, Sister Kate told me to send for two of the prettiest girls to thank the men as they said they had never experienced such a ride and they would not charge anything for the drive.

The soul of the home was the beautiful little chapel. Every morning, just before school-time, the chapel bell would ring. Anyone who wanted to go to the service began to run. If you lived on the outskirts of the home and didn't run, the service would be over before you got there. In those days no one went out without cotton hats: as the children ran into church they threw their hats into the bush outside. Some children would be giving out hymn books. There was a hymn, a bit of a prayer, another hymn, and that was it. There was an afternoon service like that too. No one had to go; no one took any notice of who was there or not, but about 50 per cent were usually there. It was sort of dropping in for a minute to talk with God.

Sunday mornings were very different – all the cottages turned up with the house-mothers as well. Tiny ones like Wally did not need to go, but once, in the middle of a service, he came dashing in crying 'Mummy!' and came and stood beside me, to everyone's amusement. On Sundays, there was a choir of girls and boys. The service was a sort of Matins and, instead of a sermon, Sister Kate or Sister Sarah read from a book. Sunday evenings, the bigger children, the helpers, house-mothers and any 'old' girls and boys staying at the home all went and every seat was taken.

Mother used to keep me supplied with comics the family had finished with. Every Sunday evening after tea, when the children were cleaned again ready for church, I would bring out these comics on the two long tables and they would read them. This seemed the best half-hour of the week. They were all together like a real family, passing the comics around happily. When the bell began to ring, the comics were collected up for the next week. When Mother sent another lot and the first lot was quite finished with, I gave it to another cottage.

About once a month or so, a priest would come from somewhere on a Monday morning and give communion. One morning, a mother with five little children, one a tiny baby, appeared from

somewhere in the bush. She had heard that a priest sometimes came on a Monday and she wanted to have her children baptised. She had walked to the home and had written all their names and ages on an envelope so that she wouldn't forget them. Sister Kate sent out an SOS for people to be godparents. Sister Sarah sent out an SOS for food and cups and saucers to have a party afterwards at her cottage which was nearest to the chapel. So the mother's children 'Gan Christensom'. They were so bushy and frightened they clung to their mother's skirt: we could only really nurse the tiny baby. When Archbishop Riley came up for confirmation, the children decorated the chapel so prettily.

There was always something on every Saturday evening at the school hall. One week, pictures were brought up free from Midland. I remember sitting through a film about Nelson and the whole time Sister Kate was telling me the *true* story about Nelson and Lady Hamilton (one of the Perth College sisters was a granddaughter of them both). The true story was still sad, but in a different way.

Another Saturday, there would be a dance. One of the old boys would bring a band up to the home. Once, while I was there, all the 'old' girls in the home were invited to a special dance in Midland; there was a coach-load of them. It was thought that a chaperone should go. Sister Kate did not really believe in that kind of thing, so she sent me. Although I was only just 20 then, I was a house-mother. We all had a whale of a time and, to the delight of the others, I was the only one who had a 'hanger-on' – I never lived it down.

Sister Kate had two rules about punishment. No child must be punished by a meal being withheld. No child must be chastised. If the crime was serious, the head man of the farm could be called to 'belt' someone. The threat of this was enough. My five older boys were a tough lot when I took them over. I knew the golden rule with children – never threaten what you cannot perform or do not intend to perform. One day I sent for the man and his belt. Big-eyed and serious, they all stood around. He gave the boys a short lecture, all the time fingering the buckle of his belt, then he went away. I never had any more trouble. They all knew I meant what I said, as I did when I washed out the dirty mouth; they all took great care that I never heard them swear again.

Parkerville Home was a wonderful place for children to grow up in then. There wasn't much money and very few comforts, but there was a real village life. One cottage would get up a concert and invite others to come and see it. There would be birthday parties. At Christmas time they made decorations for their cottages and woke up Christmas morning to find a parcel of toys by their beds. A proper Christmas dinner was held under a huge bough shed for everyone to share; afterwards there would be a couple of huge Christmas stockings which you see raffled in Perth every year – an old bachelor might win them and send them up to the home and each child would have a large gift out of them. Then they would go and sing carols in the chapel.

It seems to me that so often the best things that people do in their lives aren't heard of very much. If Sister Kate is mentioned in WA, people think 'Oh yes, Sister Kate's Home for half-castes in Queen's Park'. *That was not her life's work.* It was a job she was asked to do in the early 1930s when people were beginning to be worried about the white children in the black camps up north. She was asked if she would form a home for them. It was the beginning of the great muddle, I call it. Sister Kate undertook the job and gave the home her name, so that it would not be branded any special type. *It was the 500 or so children that went through her hands at Parkerville that were her real life's work.*

While I was at Parkerville, Edgar Deacon came up to see me and the home. We had formed a friendship of great understanding and like interests. For him – having no sisters – it was the first *friendship* he had had with the female sex. He was very taken with the chapel and I remarked that, if ever I married (which, at that time, I had no intention of doing), it would be in that chapel. Some months later, my family decided to return to England and they wanted me to go with them. At the same time, Edgar and I suddenly thought about marriage, but Edgar felt that I should go back to England in case I found someone I would rather marry there. In a couple of years, if I found no one, he would come and fetch me.

I talked with my two friends, Sister Kate and Sister Sarah, about it all. I said how Edgar was nearly 10 years older than I, and had been in the war. They said they could see it in his eyes, but it

had not made him bitter. They knew they could entrust their Wendy to him and added something I hadn't even thought of: they hoped that I would be able to carry on and run the home for them, but of course my marriage would come first. It appeared that there would be no more sisters coming to Australia from England: who would look after the home when they had gone? I had never thought I would be good enough to run the home – strangely enough it did not appeal to me either. I think I must have subconsciously realized that red tape was already creeping into such matters.

Sister Kate began talking about married life and said that, if after 10 years she could see that my marriage was a success, she would believe it could be done. After 10 years I wrote her an article, but she had already guessed long before then that I had proved to her that it could be done. I remember meeting her in Perth one day, after I had been living in the wheatbelt for a couple of years or so. She said she could not understand how I could live up there and yet not look as though I had roughed it one bit! Not only that, I wasn't wearing old-fashioned sorts of clothes and things!

In 1927, just after my twenty-first birthday, I sailed for England with the family for 18 months. On 8 January 1929, in the little chapel decorated by the children and in their presence, I was married to Edgar George Deacon. Sister Kate gave the bride away. The children wrote 'Goodbye Wendy and Peter Pan' on the back of the car.