

Chapter XIV

Until we moved into our house, the cooking was a very primitive affair. We could only boil or fry on the open fire and there was nowhere to keep anything hot. We had no bread, so we cooked a kind of thick, but light, fritter in mutton fat for every meal, unless it was stew. Sometimes, we put jam on as a sweet or cake. (We soon ate up all the biscuits we had brought!) The side of bacon was like a board. Rusty would hack off a piece of the rind, then cut some slices. Boiling water was poured over these for a few minutes, then we were able to fry them without them being too salty. The tins of meat were all the same, no matter what the label said. When the tin was opened it was revolting-looking, coarse tissue surrounded by congealed mutton fat. Corned beef was a tasty luxury beside it – one of the tastiest ways of doing it (it looked quite horrid but it tasted good) – you cooked the potatoes and, while they were still hot and rather damp, you mixed in fine-cut raw white onion and a tin of meat.

One day I thought I would try dumplings with this hard mutton fat. They came out well and Rusty nearly cried with delight – he had not had dumplings since his mother made them!

I thought that when I was able to cook with a proper stove, all my troubles would be over as long as I had dry wood. However, after that first batch of bread it was weeks before I found a yeast and a method which suited my personality! Then my pastry was not like Mother made or, I am very sure, Rusty's mother made. It took a while before I realized that it was the horrid mutton fat. Months later, when I gave my next order in, I made sure that I ordered beef dripping, not that that was very much better than the mutton fat. It was a far cry from the 'home-made' beef dripping off the roast when we were children. It couldn't have been any worse than other people's pastry because I remember Rusty making me shapes of tin to make boat-shaped pastry for when I took a 'plate'. Later on, when we had Brownie – the old cow – I used to make cream puffs and cream horns. Again, Rusty twisted tin for me to wrap the pastry round.

Rusty set some traps for rabbits, the first few days we did not catch anything and then we caught just a rabbit's foot. We looked at each other in horror, thinking of that poor little rabbit running about on three legs. We never set another trap. We ate tinned meat until the Smith brothers on our north boundary killed a sheep once a fortnight and sold us half. Most of this I pickled to keep it. Rusty turned two kero tins into containers.

The things we used kero tins for! With the top cut out and wire handles attached, we made buckets for every purpose: even in the toilet, boxed in and with a seat! Rusty was so proud: he cut the seat hole and lid out so well it was very difficult for flies to get in! I would make up a bottle of phenyl and keep it ready to pour in a few drops every time. I was very proud of my toilet house, especially when Mary told me one day that my toilet smelt good like a Perth one!

By cutting the kero tins in half, the bottom could be used as a container on the fire or a small washing-up bowl. The top half, where the hole is, could have more holes cut in it and be a plant pot. Cut in half lengthways, it was a better washing-up bowl, or a drawer in a chest of drawers made with kero boxes. After we had lined the house with hessian, the nine-foot long strips being sewn together on the old treadle machine, Rusty opened up kero tins, flattened them and formed a skirting round the walls. Then he painted this black and it looked quite good. With one or two tapestries I had brought from Port Said, the room had quite a character.

In the bedroom, either side of the bed, we had kero box cupboards, my side covered with tapestry and Rusty's with skins. On top was a kero tin cut like a lantern, the outside painted black and inside a candle so that we could read in bed if we wished to do so, without fear of fire. Rusty made me a little corner shelf in the bedroom for my antique dolls' chest of drawers in which I kept my treasures, flanked by one or two of my favourite books and our oak cross Mr Daniel had given us. (This was, at the time of the fire, in the trunk I pulled out of the house, and so was *not* burnt.)

The rest of our books were in a large bookcase in the dining room. (All living rooms, or what we now call lounges, were called 'dining rooms' in those days.) With wicker furniture, even the earth floor fitted in and gave the whole place quite a character, with bits of garden about, a birdbath, and wire plants on the verandah (again in treated kero tins). The storekeeper came out one

day, with some other men, to see Rusty. While they were waiting for him to come in from the paddock, they were amazed at the good job Rusty had made of the house, they thought it was the best 'bag' house in the district.

In those early days, everyone worked in with each other, sharing machinery, labour, and bartering all kinds of things. Once, in part payment, we had two partly grown pigs. Rusty decided to build them a cool, shady pen with a good trough for water. He fed them sloppy food like they used to be fed in our youth in England; he would quarter-fill a kero tin with wheat and fill it with water – as the wheat soaked up the water, he would pour more on. Next day, he would put the tin of soaked wheat on the back of the stove to cook gently all day. (I would watch to see that it was always full of water.) Then it would be fed to the pigs. We sold one before the summer came – the other one was too small, it was a 'runt' (or undersized one) so we decided to keep it through the summer and then kill it for the winter. As well as its cool pen, water to drink and the sloppy meals, most middays Rusty would throw a bucket of water over him.

Now, Mary Spencer kept pigs for her pocket money: in the winter she killed them, scraped them, cut them up and took so much pork into the siding of Latham and sold it to the railwaymen's wives and others. Her father's people had been pork butchers and she just loved doing this. We asked her if she would be willing to kill our pig and take so much to sell to her customers – we would go halves in the pork and the money she got from selling the remainder. She thought this was a great idea! We helped her with the scraping, etc, and when she was cutting it up she said that she thought it had more fat than hers: the customers would probably grumble and it would be a good idea if we took off twopence or so a pound. This was arranged.

We found that as soon as we cooked the pork, all the fat ran out, it was just lovely and melted in our mouths, and such a flavour! I presume it was the way we had fed the pig. Next time we saw Mary, she was piping mad with herself. She had not told the customers it wasn't her pig she had sold them, and when she saw them again they wanted more pork like the one they had the week before because it was so tasty and all the fat had disappeared. What made Mary so wild was the fact that she had let them have it cheaper!

The next barter we made was a little brown heifer, as soon as she had calved (we never seemed to have normal animals). This poor little brown cow had calved before she was really old enough and it seemed her mother instincts were nil. She just never had any interest in her calf at all. Rusty and Tom went across the salt lakes with the cart to fetch her and her calf. They put the calf in the cart and naturally expected her to follow. Oh no! She wasn't a bit interested. It took them ages to travel three or so miles. Rusty drove the cart with the calf in it. Tom sat at the back of the cart with a rope just *pulling* the cow the whole way. Sometimes she nearly pulled him out of the cart! When they got home, she wouldn't allow the calf to feed. While Tom held on to her head, Rusty (with great difficulty) managed to get enough milk for the calf. For any 'civilised' readers I should point out that for the first few days after a calf is born, the milk is not good for humans to drink. It used to be called, in my youth, 'beestings' and was almost pale brown, but the mother is usually milked in case the calf cannot drink at all and her supply would decrease. But old Brownie didn't want to know anything about being milked.

The day after we got her was a Sunday and Tom thought he would get up and milk her as a surprise. He must have had a terrible time: when she discovered what he was going to do she charged about like a mad thing and cut her leg on the corner of her drinking trough. As the men were unable to milk her properly, she got milk fever. (Earlier in this book I described how I cured this because I remembered about Mother's trouble.) When Brownie found out that twice a day she would be caught and milked, she decided she would not be caught. We found a way to fix her. I would go out with a bowl of oats in my hands and a lasso over my arm. As soon as she put her head in the oats, I would throw the rope over her head and we had her. Rusty thought the only thing to do was make a 'crush pen' in the corner of her little holding paddock. The yoke part was not easy to make because she had such small, short horns, but at last that was fixed and for the rest of her life she was only milked in the crush pen.

Then we discovered the cut on her leg – it had healed over *live maggots*! (It was blowfly

season.) Once again, the men threw her, sat on her head and held her feet: I came over with a kettle of boiling water, lint, disinfectant, lots of strong, white rag and needle and cotton. I opened up the cut, washed it, put lint on it, then sewed white rag over it and this and its edges were thoroughly soaked in disinfectant. I did this twice a day until it was quite healed. Brownie knew I was healing her and she almost tried to throw herself when she saw me coming. She never had any love for her calf, though, and we had to keep him out of her sight. When he was about six months old she got out and got to him – she nearly mounted him and would have killed him. We sent her away to a bull, but it was no good. There is a special name for her kind of cow which I have forgotten, but it appears that they do not seem able to get in calf more than once in their lives. We just kept on milking her for several years but, of course, in the end, she was giving very little milk: it was enough, though, for just the two of us. When we left the farm, we gave her to Arthur Spencer and he sold her to a butcher. The night the house burnt down, the calf got out and got to the haystack – he killed himself overeating!

About the next seeding time, after Wilky and Alan had left, the old goat was still about and a great deal of trouble to keep penned up. We were not having fresh meat yet and Rusty and the temporary man we had helping with the seeding decided they would kill the goat. They said goat chops would be as good as sheep. I thought to myself 'not if they were from a goat as old as this one seemed'. I cooked them some chops but I would not eat any myself. I think they must have been pretty awful because the men decided the goat should hang for a while. They took it away in the bush somewhere and I presumed they either hung it from a tree or buried it – I never heard or saw any more of that old goat!

The night Dollie died was a very sad night for us. She was fairly old but we didn't quite know how old she was. She was supposed to have been ten when Rusty bought her but she was very spritely and clear-eyed for her age and was a good all-rounder. She was a bit light for the cart (although it was only a small two-wheeler) and a bit heavy for riding. It was summer and Dollie didn't seem too well. Rusty thought she might be a bit sanded although it was the wrong time of the year. When the wheat is just a few inches above ground and rain splashes sand on to the fresh green blades, the horses would eat the blades and sand would form a knot in their stomachs. I think the cure was something to do with honey and then about a pound of salts. One person would stand either side of the horse with a thick stick which was rolled up and down the horse's tummy. If this didn't work, a drench was given. The horse got over it all right. This being summer, we didn't know what to do with Dollie but to let her doze over the trough in the shade. It was a bright, moonlit night and the noise of rails, cans and then the cow's frightened moo woke me, and I woke Rusty. We ran straight over to the sheds: Dollie had somehow got herself in a silly position in a corner, wedged between the barbed fence and a tree, trying to push her way through. The noise we heard was Brownie breaking through her paddock to get as far away as possible from Dollie, because she knew death was near. All Rusty could do was to cut the fence that was pressing into her, but he knew that as soon as he did she would fall over – which is exactly what happened. She tried feebly to get up: Rusty smoothed her head and told her she would only get up in the happy hunting grounds. She just closed her eyes and went straight there. So, sadly, we went back to bed.

Early in the morning there was the problem of what to do with her. Of course, she weighed about a ton and the ground was solid like cement at that time of the year. It was impossible to either bury her or burn her. With the tractor, Rusty dragged her away on the sand plain to the east. For some months afterwards when we were coming home and the wind was in a certain direction, instead of Dollie being in the corner of her large paddock to greet us, we could faintly smell her body! When the rains came, what was left was buried. Dear old Dollie!

The first time we went to visit the Taylors (Mary's parents) we brought back the prettiest, daintiest, tabby cat which I named, at once. Dinkie. He was very spoiled and we loved him. People said he would be no good because he was a tom: he would leave home or, if we had him doctored, he would never catch any of the bush mice which invaded the house at certain seasons of the year. Dinkie so loved his creature comforts, we could never imagine him leaving home, but when he grew to 'manhood' he began going bush all day, even in the heat of the summer, and he would come

home looking terrible. Then came the day when he didn't come home at all. When the autumn came and still no Dinkie, we knew we must get another cat – a female this time. Someone in Latham, on siding day, said they had one we could have. Neither of us realized that on most farms there were numbers of half-wild cats living among the sheds and, when they bred, the kittens would be killed *if* they could be caught in time. The next time we went in to the siding, there was a half-grown cat in a bag waiting for us. We had gone in the cart and, as Rusty went to hand the bag up to me, the cat launched herself out of Rusty's hands and under Dollie's legs, which upset us all. Getting her from under Dollie's legs was no easy matter, and I'm not sure whether we decided to take her out of the bag or not, but she got out and cleared off into the bush. We both heaved a sigh of relief: we didn't like the idea of a half-wild thing like that.

All this had been seen by an old German who had been dossing down for some time over in the wheat stack. He suddenly appeared from the scrub and said that if we wanted a 'pussy' there was a lovely, clean, gentle pussy living on the stack. She was a good pussy – didn't have a family or anything – and he didn't want to leave her there. He went off and came back with a really lovely young cat which, of course, we called Pussy. She was black, with long white stockings and a very long white bib. Her fur was so clean, it shone, and the white was pure white. He gently put her in the bag and I nursed her all the way home. We put a dish of milk down for her when we got home and then let her out just by the dish, hoping she wouldn't run away. She didn't look at the milk. She walked quietly round the house, in the various rooms, and only then did she come back to the milk and have a drink. Yes, she would stay. She was the cleverest cat we ever had to live with us and a very good mother – and so clean in every way.

A few weeks later, one afternoon, Dinkie walked in. He sat and looked at Pussy and Pussy sat and looked at him. I thought I would be polite and introduce them to each other. I was delighted to think that they would be married and have very beautiful children. Dinkie stayed just long enough to get her in the family way and then he was never seen near our home again.

About four years later, we called at a farm about 12 miles away and, while Rusty was out talking with the farmer, I went inside with the family. As usual, the children came around me showing me their kittens, etc. They said they had a dear old cat, Tommy, and went to find him. They put him on the floor and said that this was Tommy and how he came to stay with them some years ago. I looked at him with amazement. I called 'Dinkie' and he lifted up his head and waddled straight to me, not really knowing what he was doing. I told the children all about him; not really meaning it, they offered him to me to take home. I told them that he was very happy with them and that I had a mother cat and her two daughters who would probably not be very happy to see him.

When the men returned, I told the children to take Tommy a little way outside and put him down. Telling Rusty to watch, I called 'Dinkie' and the old tom again waddled towards me. The men were amazed. The thing that amazed me was the fact that a very spoilt cat had travelled so far over rough country. That was what happened to Dinkie, alias Tommy.

In due time, Pussy came to me, moving in a queer way. I asked her if her time had come and she assured me, in her own way, that this was so and would I please stroke her head. I did, while she gave birth to five beautiful kittens. We had decided to kill all but one at once, as that is the kindest thing to do. One looked very like Dinkie and we decided to keep that one and call it 'Tiddles'. (When Rusty was a boy, they had a cat called Tiddles.) There was also a perfect black one with such delightfully silky fur that we decided to keep that too, and not very imaginatively called her Smut. They both turned out to be females, which was really just as well.

They all three had two litters a year – Pussy sometimes three. It was quite a family affair, especially when Tiddles or Smut had them – one gave birth and the others cleaned them and they never seemed to bother that the kittens were gone the next day. People would often beg for one of Pussy's kittens, if one was like her, and a female. Pussy would bring them up beautifully for a while, then she would think that we would be taking these kittens away soon so she would take them off into the bush and hide them. (I have spent all day following her to find them.) Every time she was expecting her family I had to go and stroke her head. Once we returned as it was getting dark and Pussy was due any minute. She had trodden down a nest just near the house and the dirty

look she gave me because I was not home when she needed me! I got a sugar bag out and put it on the spare bed and put Pussy on it, As I prepared the tea I would pop in and out when she gave an extra meow and smooth her head!

Every sundown, as I went out to collect the eggs, I would call 'Tiddles, Pussy, Smut'. (I don't know why, but it was always in that order.) They would come trotting with me, just like dogs, and go scampering off, bent on mischief, just like dogs. In the cooler months, I would go for walks in my 'park', as I called the virgin bush Rusty had left for me behind the house. If Rusty was working in a paddock beyond, I would go out, perhaps with lunch or something. They always waited for me on the edge of the trees. If we were away for a few days, they went bush. Cats won't stay in an empty house: they will be near, though. Pussy went to the sheds; Smut, being more hardy, went bush. I don't know about Tiddles, the scared, timid one. I think she was probably over at the sheds but was too frightened to reappear for nearly three days after we returned. I would go to the back door and call all three: within an hour, Smut would appear. After several hours, Pussy would come with the attitude 'so you have returned at last!' (after I had called several times). It was seldom that Tiddles came before at least a couple of days.

They did vary in character. Tiddles was a real fool and so timid. Smut was just the opposite, very daring and quick: she should have been a boy. She was a real loner and not a bit interested in being cuddled. Pussy was the perfect mother cat in all ways, clean and dainty. They were all clean and good in the house, they would not attempt to jump on the table or anything like that. I only gave them milk and they licked out any tins. They came running when they heard the tin opener, *not* the carving knife. Except for the year when there was a plague of field mice, they kept the mice down, especially around the sheds.

Once, in the winter, I went away for two nights and I told Rusty to make sure a window was open at night so that Pussy could get out. She liked to stay by the fire while there was any warmth at all. Rusty did not leave a window open. During the night he heard Pussy meowing and didn't take any notice. Later, the meows became very desperate so he got up, prepared to be irate. As the floor was all earth, she could have chosen anywhere as a toilet, but she knew it was indoors. She had started to dig a hole under the doorway and had become stuck! Rusty was so impressed by it all that he left the hole for me to see when I came home.

On the farm, dogs were not allowed indoors: on the verandah, yes, but not inside. Sometimes, when it was very hot, Barrie would be on the verandah with his nose half in the doorway: he knew that the very moment he put a paw inside, the cats would be at him. One of the bank managers had a little dog he took everywhere with him – one of those silly town dogs – and this dog would walk in and drink the cats' milk. Tiddles would shoot straight out of the house and up the nearest tree and stay there for hours after the dog had gone. Pussy and Smut would just sit and stare angrily at him; he always had more sense than to go near them. I always admired their good manners in not making a fuss: they were a lovely family and so happy together. It was always a bit of a mystery as to how they got in the family way – I never smelt, or saw or heard any gentlemen cats about. It would only be in fairy tales that they managed without help, especially twice a year and five at a time! They were my great friends, especially as six days a week I was alone all day.

Soon after we were established in Eōthen, I was given a beautiful, fully grown collie called 'Barrie'. I thought he would be a good companion for me to take walking in the bush but, alas, he was a man's dog. He was always very polite to me and all that, but he refused to go out with me. He had always been with men. Women were all right for meals and to guard their house, but that was all. He knew his place, too, and never attempted to come in the house. We only tied him up at night, because we were told he was inclined to wander. One morning, we were very amused to find Barrie dozing with a dead rabbit beside him. There was not a mark on the rabbit and we presumed he wandered near Barrie and Barrie just reached out and broke his neck. Not being a kangaroo dog, he certainly wasn't going to eat it. One night, after about a year, we had forgotten to tie Barrie up and we never saw him again. Months and months later, we heard that a neighbour, seeing him in the distance in the early morning, thought he was a dingo and shot him (he was the same colour as a

dingo). When he discovered his mistake, he was afraid to tell me, as he knew how fond I was of Barrie and also knew that Barrie would not have harmed his sheep. In his youth he had used to round up sheep.

Judy, a kangaroo pup, was given to us when she was fairly small – not the kind of dog one can have as a pet. Like a greyhound they have only one aim in life: to kill and to eat anything they can find within reach. Not that they are fierce with humans at all. Rusty fixed strong fencing wire between two large, shady trees. He made a kennel and put it under one with water near. He then put Judy on a chain that was fixed to the wire, so that she could run up and down the wire between the two trees. When I gave her a meal I would keep out of the range of her chain and wire as she used to jump so fiercely for her food that she would have knocked me over. But she was afraid of the cats. t

We had a pet bobtail who used to come in the summer and drink the cats' milk. I wouldn't hear him come in, but as he drank the milk he would get it up his tiny, short nose and sneeze, giving himself away. One of the cats might see him and give him a gentle pat on his side, then walk gently with him out of the house as much as to say 'well, now, you've had your drink, you can go out!'

One autumn we had a plague of mice and one day I fell foul of three in unusual places: I really thought I would not be able to stand them much more. The cats did their best, but they got worn out. We kept the 150lb bag of flour in a large, old 40-gallon oil drum so that the mice couldn't climb up into it. But they were walking along the rafters and falling down on to it. I think it was Smut who discovered this and lay on the bag waiting for them. I had a small jug of milk up in a cupboard on the bag wall. There was a slit in the wall behind and a mouse had eaten the bag wall and was bobbing up and down in the jug of milk. I took him out to the pig bucket in the milk. I went to knead up my bread I had set the night before, which was covered with a cloth. I found a mouse dead in the dough, which filled me with horror. I made up one loaf from the dough farthest away from the body, just enough to last until the next day, and took the rest down to the fowls. Ever after, I always tied the dough basin in a strong pillowcase. Morning and evening, at that time of the year, it was chilly and I had a special little coat I would wear. That evening, I reached up and, taking the jacket off the hook, put it on only to discover a mouse in the shoulder! I was then in such a state that I stripped the bed before I got in it!

When I first thought of a garden around the house, I decided against any formal flower beds – it was not practical in such a climate and did not lend itself to the surroundings. I thought of little rockeries around some of the smaller, prettier gum saplings that had golden pussy-willow-shaped flowers. There was also half a dead stump to build a larger rockery, with a bird bath for the wild birds, but this must be exposed so that it would not be a trap where cats could hide. It was a great success, the bird bath: true, in summer I might need to fill it three times a day. So very many kinds of birds came, in the mornings and the early evenings. I didn't know many of their names so gave them names of my own. The ring-necks always arrived in a mass, drank, bathed and departed. On the other hand, the magpies were loners and very disagreeable if the little brown bush birds came around. One would stand in the middle of the bath trying to peck at the birds in a ring on the edge. The stupid thing never realized that they took it in turns to drink behind his back while he was so busy pecking! All the other birds would drink together, quite happily.

In the very hot weather we often put the bed on the verandah: sometimes I would wake in the night and by the light of the moon see rabbits drinking and, once or twice, even kangaroos. (I had been told, in my youth, that rabbits didn't drink! That may be so in England when they were in hutches, with lovely lettuce leaves to feed on.)

In the hot weather, the birds would slink at the foot of the trees, trying to make themselves as small as possible. If a little breeze blew up, they would fly up in the trees, face the wind, and hold their little wings out to catch any air. In the winter, they fluffed themselves out into a round ball, to keep warm. I knew when a 'willy-willy' was coming, and its direction, before I heard it. Suddenly the birds would fly in the opposite direction as though they had heard a gunshot. The cats were terrified of the magpies and run from them. I hated the crows when they 'cawed' on a hot day as though they were waiting for death and they wouldn't move for you unless you went outside with a gun. Even a stick would not fool them.

I loved the little plovers in their dinner-jackets running behind the plough or seeder: and nothing could decorate an ash-cloured dead gum tree like a flock of pink and silver-grey galahs. The bright green and yellow ring-necks with their black neckband would flutter in and out among the bushes beside the track.

Once there were two emus running along a fence ahead of us. We were going 35 miles an hour and the emus were well ahead. Suddenly, the fence went at right angles and the stupid things hit each other head on, which would be at over 70 miles an hour. You never saw such a large ball of flying feathers. It was so funny! They really are stupid and inquisitive creatures, always attracted by anything that sparkles. Rusty was using a small chopper over by the sheds when he realized that he was attracting a whole family of emus. Father always led, with wives and children behind. They could do a great deal of damage to the crops with their heavy, ungainly feet. He knew if he could shoot the leader, the others would race off lost. He called to me to bring the gun – unfortunately his voice made the dog bark and the leader turned before Rusty had the gun.

When we needed hay for Dollie, we would take bales over to Arthur Spencer's as he had a chaff cutter. We usually went on siding day – Fridays – when the mail train came in and fresh stores were in the shop. Mary and I would go into Latham while the men did the cutting. This particular day, Mary had been over to stay with her people for a few days, so Arthur and I went into Latham and would bring Mary back. Suddenly, a kangaroo jumped out of the bush in front of us and we hit it. Arthur stopped the truck and ran back to the kangaroo. He shouted to me to bring a tool so that he could kill the poor thing, as he only wore soft shoes. Then he changed his mind as he realized the kangaroo had only stood up for a moment to let a half-grown joey jump out of her pouch and then she dropped dead. Arthur caught the little joey and I nursed it while he put the kangaroo on the back of the truck, and made Sport (Mary's little fox terrier) go there too, as he was frightening the joey. By the time we got to Latham, Sport was covered with blood and Mary thought he had killed the kangaroo! Mary made a little pouch out of a sugar bag for Joey and hung it on the back of the kitchen door. He and Sport became great friends and, as he grew, they used to race each other about the farmyard. One day, Mary found, to her horror, blowflies had got in his 'pouch' and blown his little tail and gone right inside him, so she thought it best to kill him. We all missed him for he was great fun. Mary wept when she killed him, which was quite something because she would kill her lambs, cats or pigs without turning a hair.

My great source of interest was the different kinds of insects, bees, beetles and all the ants. I had a large, deep blue, shallow rose bowl and this I filled with water and put on the table. I made nail holes in a boot polish tin and would stand small flowers, bits of bush, or leaves in the holes. Then I would hide the tin by piling bits of pink marble from the salt lakes over it and in the hot weather the bees found this and would come in for drinks. Sometimes, if it was very hot, they would push each other in the water and their wings would be too wet for them to get out. I would put in a finger and they would crawl up and over my hand; they would continue walking until their little wings were dry. Sometimes, if very wet, they might wait quite a long way up my arm before they were able to fly away. Never once did either they or I think about any stinging.

It was fun to watch a hornet building her nest. There was one kind of beetle – more like a hornet – who would make a hole in the side of a rise of soil and then inject a spider so that she was senseless, but not dead. I saw one flying just above the ground, pulling a spider along. (She was too heavy for the hornet-beetle to carry.) When near the hole, she ran around the spider, measuring her, and then made her hole a little bigger. She must have laid her eggs before because when she went to pull the spider in the hole its legs caught, so she quickly twisted the body of the spider around and pulled her in backwards! She then covered the hole up so beautifully that, although I had watched her doing it, I could never have found the hole again.

I found the trapdoor caterpillar in the toilet. She had about half-made her hole when I found her. In her front feet, she would bring a grain of sand, then she would go down for the next. All but about three pairs of hind legs would disappear down the hole, then she would have to sort of concertina herself up to bring her head and laden front feet up. The next time I went there, she had finished and I didn't know where her home was. When I went the next day, I found that she had

gone out, leaving her door open – I suppose she was away for food or something. The door was the most beautiful piece of work. First she must have woven or spun a small round basin, its lip slightly larger than the base. The lip at one side was attached to the side of the wall of her home, then she had filled the basin with sand and cemented it in. I saw it upside down as she left it a few minutes. That door was a most wonderful piece of work and I would have loved to see her making it. Although she could push it open from the inside, I do not see how she could open it from the outside! I never saw it open again.

In the early spring, I would often see little insect-like creatures walking about with bits of stick and flower petals stuck on them, almost like a shell. (It was to fool the birds or hornets.) On a thin, dead-looking branch, I would find a miniature bundle of faggots hanging, beautifully made; on looking more closely, I would find it was woven around a cocoon!

At a certain time in early spring, a trail of furry caterpillars was always to be found. Old bushmen could tell you what kind of season we would have by the date they first appeared. They always went about it together in a long string, about 30 or 40 of them. They were attached to the one in front by a kind of spider's thread. I don't really think the leader knew where he was going, because one year, I found a trail near the sheds and, with a stick, I gently pushed the head of the one in front until they formed a circle. They then had no leader and were going round and round as fast as they could. I left them. Some time later, when Rusty came over for lunch, I asked him if they were still going around in a circle. He said they had been, but he felt sorry for the little things; he had broken the circle and they had gone tearing off over the sand plain. I couldn't seem to find out who laid them and where, or what happened to them in the end. They went about like that so that the birds would think they were a snake.

I liked the spiders, all except the redback spider, of course. If I was poking about in any of the cupboards or anything, I always wore gloves, but I fell foul of one for all that. Often, in the summer, we put our bed on the verandah. One morning, as I walked in my slippers to the bathroom, something bit my foot. Letting out a yell, I shook my slipper off thinking a large ant had bitten me. Rusty quickly picked the slipper up and found a redback spider in it, which he at once killed, then sucked my foot and spat, hoping to take out any poison. Apart from that, neither of us knew what else to do. We were not sure if it was a bite or a sting and the books we had did not tell us anything. (Remember, this was in 1930 and we knew a great deal less about things then.) I seemed quite detached and just calmly remarked that, if I didn't die within a couple of hours, it would be all right. Well, of course, I didn't die, but I was certainly not all right, for about three days! The pain in the foot nearly drove me mad; sometimes it was hot and damp, then cold and dry. It hardly swelled at all and was faintly red. After three days it was quite all right and when we went into the siding and told people about it, they said my blood must have been in very good condition to fare so well. They told us of a man who sat on one in the toilet and nearly went mad; I could quite understand how a small child could die.

We only ever had two snakes near the house – one on the verandah. Rusty was bringing the truck round to the house to pick me up to go out. As he drove around, his eyes seemed to be popping out of his head and he nearly drove into the side of the verandah. I shouted to him and, at the same time, he shouted to me not to move. There was a snake a couple of feet from me, sliding around the verandah post. The other snake, much smaller, I found just by the pig-bucket. I called Pussy, who was in the house; she came out and, seeing the snake, went towards it, spitting. The snake went off hissing and they both went into the bush, side by side, hissing and spitting. What finally happened, I don't know, but Puss came back some time later. She didn't tell me if she had killed it or not, but she *had* killed snakes because she would bring headless ones in to show her children. She would often kill rabbits as big as herself, and, when she brought them into the house, we would give her the head and take the rest.

My favourite small creatures were the ants. (Not white ants; anyway, they are not really ants at all.) Their way of life, like the bees, is so well organized, tidy and thorough. They seem to know hours before humans what the weather will be. A couple or so chains from the house, in my park, was a large ant city. First you would strike a large trail of ants going two ways. You followed this

to the left and then, shortly, there was this city. It must have been at least five feet in diameter. The city itself was, of course, underground but the surface was dotted with holes. I would stamp all over the city and then dash out of the circle. The whole city would come alive; ants ran everywhere, the noise having brought them out of their houses. The ants who lived in this city were medium-sized black ants and their wide trail went both sides of the city and was always there. Whenever I went to see them they were always busy. I expect when rain was coming, they did what all the other ants did much nearer the house: they shut up all their front doors and all but one back door until the last. They would build up a bank around this, making it much higher on the side where the rain would come so that the water would run around the hole and not in it. As the storm got nearer, so they ran faster. If really heavy rain came, they shut the back door, too, so that they would not be flooded.

Sometimes you would find them moving house, taking all their eggs and young with them. Others were busy running to and from, showing them the way. Once I spent some time watching a number of small ants taking a dead fly off a bench. When they got to the edge, the fly threatened to tip over, so more ants ran round the other side to take the weight and make a perfect balance. When the ants had invaded my table, I would put a wide band of grease around the legs. Those trapped on the table would run from leg to leg and then, finding there was no way over the grease, they would drop off and hurry back to report to base!

In those days, flies were the real trial. At least blowflies were only about for a few short weeks and you could cover things up, but those hated flies, from sun-up to sun-down – always everywhere. No Aerogard, Scram or even flydoors and windows in those days. In thundery weather, they even bit your legs through stockings. Half an hour after you had cleaned the mirror or pictures, they were fly-blown again. As you ironed the white shirts you had to cover them up or there would be fly marks all over them. I remember once, when we had a meal in a large kitchen with a number of people round the table, the place was so full of flies we looked across the table at people through the flies and wondered how we managed to eat without eating any of them! That was an extreme case and I guess the people weren't very clean.

We covered all food and when we opened a tin of food, we put the empty tin in the back of the fire. When Rusty did the fire in the morning, the burnt tin was put outside in a special kero tin until it was full, then Rusty took the lot and buried them.

I made a kind of cage of white mosquito netting to drop over our chairs to sit in comfort for a while, but it was too hot. Later, Rusty made a waiting room in one corner of the verandah in which we put deckchairs and a small table - we called it 'our sanctuary'. A wild cat got in there one day and we had a great deal of trouble letting it out without getting hurt.

In some parts of the bush, the anthills were just like tombstones, and they were always the colour of the soil they were on (which of course they would be, being built from it). The hills were as hard as cement and sometimes quite difficult to knock down. I've seen Rusty standing on one with a pickaxe, trying to break up the rest. We had one eight feet high, which was quite tall for that part of West Australia. Rusty said that sometimes there have been as many as three kinds in one hill, white ants being at the bottom. It was believed (in those days) that white ants did not build the hills, but fought the real builders out of them. I should think this is probably true.

For most of the year, the interior of WA is a dry, hard, dusty, wild land. As harsh and unfriendly as any desert in spite of all the trees and scrub. Every living creature and plant is wholly taken up with survival until the rains come, then it has its own untamed beauty and mystery, rather like the ocean. When you have lived there, if only for a few years, you feel not as other men somehow. You feel sort of set apart and cleansed – like the old fishermen and ancient shepherds. It's something to do with the elements, I think. It can't really be expressed in words. You are, among other things, humbled and nearer to understanding more of the creation of the world; of God, maybe!