

ZANETTI'S BEACH TO COBRAM

The next day dawned sunny and clear. We decided that the first thing we had to do was to get really familiar with the refurbished craft and the motor so that we knew what we could do. In all the snag panic the day before I'd not had a chance to try out the sweep oar, and as we discussed how the coming day might go over breakfast, I said that I wanted to see how the sweep oar went, and whether it would help us through future snaggy bits. Lorraine reckoned we needed some practice in making fast to the shore, so we decided to devote most of the morning getting to know the raft and its capabilities properly.

She backed us out into the main run of the river, with both of us out on the back deck together and the raft as stable as you could want. (Such satisfying solidity after the submerging cat hulls!). I took the sweep oar to give it a proper try-out and see what it would do, how quickly it would pull the stern round, and I adjusted the telescopic arm to a comfortable length. It certainly worked well keeping us oriented the right way. I pretended that we were in the middle of another emergency and dragged on the sweep oar as hard as I could to see how radically I could alter the direction of the raft. The arm promptly bent at right angles where the telescopic joint was. Shit! Another good idea down the gurgler. We'd have been better off with the ordinary old rowing boat oar that we'd used during the trials on Dora Creek..

So we stopped several times to practice tying up and getting back out into the main run of the river again. While we were doing this the sunny promise of the morning disappeared and it turned into an awful, squally day. There'd be a little bit of sunshine, then it would cloud over with the occasional thunderstorm and pretty strong, gusty winds. Blowing us around like mad. A cold day. And raining enough that we only kept the minimum number of windows open to navigate by, which meant the wind really blew us around. It felt a bit like being in an inflated paper bag at the mercy of the elements. But we thought we'd done pretty well with our morning practice, nonetheless. We were getting pretty adept at swinging up into the current and just nudging into a little shelving sandy bank and tying up to a tree. Picking our spot. So we continued making our way down the river, negotiating the hazards.

I took over as skipper for the next few days – I really enjoy it. I found the raft quite easy to steer and responsive enough with the motor mostly just running on idle. It is very quiet on idle, you can't hear it 10 feet away. If you have to have a sudden urgent response (a bit of a joke with a craft this size and shape) you certainly have to rev the engine up a bit, but basically it steers well if you can gauge where you want to go and how you want to get there well in advance. If you feel it is going to hit something, you have to rev the motor hard – which is counterintuitive when you are running into something – and then you can force the boat to swing differently, and more quickly. If you know the snags are coming, and have time to work out your path, it is not difficult. You can see quite well through the shelter part of the vessel to see where to steer it. It is important to work with the current though, rather than try to compete with it. As you approach a bend you can see that the current is going to take you to the outside of the curve, so you just face the boat in the direction you want to go as you come out of the bend, and you let the current take you while you progress forward. Trouble is, the boat is not usually facing exactly where it is going, because of the current – not a problem to me when I have the controls and know what is

happening, but a bit disconcerting to Bill who is sitting inside towards the front watching us drifting toward the snags on one side, while facing the snags on the other. I got to really enjoy slaloming around the bends swinging the rear to miss one snag while turning the front to miss the next one.

When the river boats were plying the Murray and the river was one of the major traffic arteries for heavy goods, wool, wheat and whatever, local workers were paid by the government to remove snags from the river, in order to facilitate passage for the big paddlewheelers. It wasn't till the 1960s or 70s, or maybe even later, that it was realised that removal of the snags was irrevocably changing the river's ecosystem and many parts of the Murray had suffered a severe reduction in biodiversity such that prized Murray fish species like Murray Cod and Yellowbelly were becoming increasingly rare, and the dreaded carp were just about everywhere. The snags provided shelter and security for a wide range of underwater organisms and their removal had tipped the ecological scales in favour of things we would rather do without. These days, somewhat ironically, local workers are again being paid by the Murray/Darling Authority, this time to fell suitable trees so that they fall into the river and become snags, in an attempt to repair the damage that's been done by removing them.

While we were doing our practice landings it occurred to me that we had no idea how much petrol the motor used. You wouldn't want to run out of petrol approaching a forest of snags, or in the middle of any delicate manoeuvre, and my jaundiced assumption was that if it was going to run out it would run out somewhere maximally inconvenient. So the next practice landfall we made we decided to stop for a cup of coffee and I could check the petrol then. Turned out there was plenty of petrol in the engine tank – but I topped it up at lunchtime each day “just to be on the safe side”.

In order for the next part of this story to make sense I'll have to digress a bit and give you the background to The Matter of the Shear Pin. It goes like this:

Just before I took delivery of the outboard motor I happened to be doing my homework and reading one of those *Waterways* pamphlets on water safety, and one of the tips it gave was to always carry a spare shear pin with you, as it's not very helpful to lose your propeller, and the shear pin is what you sacrifice so this doesn't happen.. When I went to pick up the motor the next day I asked them for a spare shear pin. This request was met by a blank look from the young woman who was doing the paperwork, and she went out to the workshop to ask someone. She came back and looked up a manual to see what sort of shear pin my Suzuki outboard needed, and this seemed to take some time, and was accompanied by frowns of mystification. Eventually she went over to a wall covered in little plastic bags with little things in them, and came back with one with a pin sort of thing in it. And charged me \$1.65. Feeling a bit sanctimonious that I was being rigorous in taking all sensible precautions I took it to Lo's and stashed it in an Erinmore pipe tobacco tin marked “Shear Pin” in heavy black Texta and put it in the little old Globite suitcase that had been our toolbox for all of our travels.

OK. Back to the Murray. We've just finished coffee, I've undone the bow line and I'm standing on the front deck with it just passed around a tree trunk while Lorraine gets the motor started. "The bloody thing won't go into forward gear again!" she yells, while continuing to try to engage the gear lever.

"Sure?" "Sure I'm sure. Look!"

"OK. Hang on". I went back ashore and tied the raft up to the tree, and went down to the stern to join Lorraine, wondering what the next sensible thing to do might be. I took my pants and underpants off and waded in behind the stern to make certain that the motor wasn't stuck in the sand. The water was muddy, so I bent down to feel around the propeller (Lo had turned the motor off again by this). It wasn't stuck in the sand, but it was only just clear of it. So that wasn't the problem. Lo started the motor again and put the gear lever to the forward position, but I couldn't see if the prop was turning, and I certainly wasn't going to feel around down there to find out! But it certainly didn't seem to be doing much in the way of propelling.

"Does it go into reverse?" I asked, and Lo moved the lever the other way. There was an immediate rush of water past my left foot, and I nearly shit myself when I realised how close I'd come to losing a few toes.

"OK. OK. Christ that was close! Let's turn it off and think about this."

We were miles from anywhere. It was too far away from the highway for either of us to walk, and of course there was no mobile signal. And neither of us is any great shakes with engines.

"I'm glad we gave the cat another goldfish and brought a brand-new motor so this sort of thing wouldn't happen." I muttered darkly. But Lorraine was busy being constructive.

"What does the shear pin do? Could it be that? It must be a pretty common problem or they wouldn't be so hot on you having a spare one."

Of course! That'd be it! We'd churned up a bit of sand as we came in to this beach, so the sacrificial pin must have sheared off and the shaft is just spinning inside the prop. It goes in reverse because it's catching on something... or something. It seemed like a pretty good hypothesis for a couple of mechanical dubbos to come up with. So we unscrewed the motor mounts and between the two of us manage to haul the motor up and lie it on its side on the back deck. I ferreted out the Globite toolbox and put it beside the motor, and got out the Erinmore tobacco tin marked "Shear Pin", and gave the little plastic bag to Lo for safe keeping, (I would most certainly have managed somehow to drop it in the water). Then I went back into the water behind the back deck because the propeller was at a very convenient height to work at now it was lying on the deck. I knocked the split pin out of the slotted nut that held the prop on, undid the holding nut and slid the prop off. There was nowhere that I could see to give any clue as to where the shear pin might be. Lo went inside the raft and came out with the handbook for the motor. "If all else fails, read the directions." she grinned. We looked up the index, and there was no mention of a shear pin. We looked at the exploded diagrams and there was no shear pin shown anywhere. No wonder the salesgirl had trouble finding which pin to give me! This Suzuki 4-stroke didn't have a shear pin! I have to say that I wasn't real sold on the way the salesgirl had decided to solve the problem, though – by pretending she'd found one.

So I put the prop back on, we fastened the motor back into position and we

tested it again (with me safely on the back deck this time). “It’s funny with sporadic mechanical things like this,” I said as we prepared to start the motor again, “sometimes taking something apart and putting it back together again magically does the trick. My old man used to call it The Fiddle Factor.” I was doing my best to be optimistic. But it was not to be. It would go into reverse, but nothing would get it to go into forward gear.

“Oh well,” said Lorraine brightly, after a thoughtful pause, “At least it goes backwards. We’ll just have to get to Cobram backwards, then, and get someone to look at it when we get there.”

“Do you reckon we could?”

“I don’t see why not. At least it will be easier to see where we’re going than steering from the back. Let’s give it a try. Anyway, I don’t see that we have much choice.”

So off we went – backwards. Cobram was still the best part of fifty kms away down the ever-winding river, but going backwards didn’t seem to be presenting too much of a problem for Lo, who I think was secretly enjoying exercising her skippering skills under duress.



Playing with the propeller had taken up a fair bit of time, and we only did another five Ks or so before we saw a sheltered beach and decided to pull in there and call it a day. During the afternoon the day had set in cold, wet and windy, and we seemed always to be struggling down long reaches into the teeth of what was by now quite a strong wind. For some reason, when anticipating a voyage such as this, you don’t seem to think about lousy weather, or if you do, you unconsciously assume that it won’t last long. I think that the Default position for anticipation is imagining things going smoothly and happening in fine weather, whereas by now we were having to face up to the unsavoury fact that the preponderance of our weather had been shithouse. After we’d stopped for the day the weather got even worse and we were glad we’d stopped when we did. It turned into an industrial strength storm and we were lashed by a series of vicious squalls and driving rain with the full thunder and lightning *son et lumiere*. But as my dear old Mum is fond of saying in crook times: “This, too, will pass” - and by 8pm the river was like a mirror. The wind had dropped completely and tranquility was the go. The moon was out and fullish. It was fantastic. Just the

sort of thing we'd come for.

Sitting there enjoying the ambience of the riverine evening my thoughts turned to the events of the day. I couldn't help thinking about how close the propeller had come to my toes. What would we have done if it had chopped some off? The memory of feeling the propeller so very close to my foot reminded me that serious accidents can so easily happen despite your most strenuous efforts to be careful. On the other hand, in other contexts I'd argue strenuously that a big part of life is about living with risk, and too much risk minimisation can turn you into something like Gregor, Kafka's character in *Metamorphosis*, who won't even get out of bed in the morning for fear something might happen to him. It shits me that a move in the direction of Gregor seems to come with the Journey Over the Hill.

If the testimony of Lorraine, Kent, Alan Key and the Thackerays was anything to go by I was certainly twitchy, worried and ill-at-ease on this trip, especially at the start. (*Not only at the start!*) They all remarked on it. I could feel it, too, but I was inclined to explain it to myself as being due to the medication I was still on for the red widdles, and to a general disequilibrium brought about by the cancer diagnosis.

It's a very fine distinction to make: on the one hand I was quite plainly being a worrywart, yet when I thought about it a bit I felt that a lot of my concerns were quite justified (the way worrywarts do). We were travelling in outback Australia, I'd remind myself, and how demanding and often downright dangerous that can be is the stuff of antipodean legend. It's not a country to be trifled with. I didn't want us to be a sort of modern-day Burke and Wills whose downfall was ignorance and arrogance. While I didn't think of myself as a soft-palmed city lounge lizard, I was only too aware that I wasn't a seasoned bushman either. And sitting on top of all these chastening realisations was the adamantine reality of our inexorable senescence, (oops! Sorry about that. It just came tumbling out) and the plethora of reminders that neither of us can run for buses like we used to. It occurred to me that should I fall into the water – not all that hard to imagine with someone as clumsy as I can be – if it was on one of those days when the arthralgia was in my shoulders in a big way I don't even know if I'd be able to swim. Having been hale and hearty all my life, it isn't all that easy to come to terms with the fact that there are all these things that you used to take for granted that you can't do any more. And you are reminded of this at every turn. The osteo in my hands means that I can't any more pull out the stiff-sprunged release mechanism that lets the jockey wheel on the trailer fold up, and what would be the work of an instant for Kent or Alan takes me much longer because I have to go to the toolbox and find a tool to help. I didn't want us to be like the English tourists years ago who needlessly died of thirst sitting in the shade of a baobab tree, which any bushman knows is full of potable water. It's one thing to think it's great for a couple of old farts to embark on an adventure like we were doing, but where do you draw the line between being adventurous and being irresponsible? Where do you draw the line between sensible caution and pusillanimity? While I was writing this up I was reading a book about travelling in Oz written by Mark Day called *Pulse of the Nation*. (My 94 year-old Mum of the still curious and interested mind had recommended it to me). In it there is a passage about Mark's wife and her ambivalence about embarking on the trip around Oz that he had planned: "*Behind her ability to make people laugh lurks a mind geared to disaster. Where I assume things will be alright, Wendy assumes everything will go wrong. She says I'm too optimistic; that I take too much for granted. She is the devil's advocate, identifying all the things that may get in the way.*" I think Wendy and I would understand one another. (Mind you, I wasn't

like that when I was younger. There is a temptation to label this geriatric caution “wisdom”, but someone who is truly wise probably wouldn’t call it that).

The next morning we set off again, a tad disappointed that the motor hadn’t miraculously decided to go forwards again.

I had some sort of vague hope that when we started the motor after giving it a decent overnight rest, and a chance to fully cool down, that it might engage forward gear again. But no such luck. I had found that standing and bending down to the motor was very tiring, and although I could manage a certain amount of control by moving the steering arm with my legs, I certainly did not have the energy to stand up all day. It was a bit congested to bring a big folding chair out onto the back deck, but we had with us a little toilet seat that we use when we are camping that is like a fold-up stool, only with a plastic toilet seat instead of a piece of canvas stretched across. It was just the right height to sit at to reach the motor controls, and it was still high enough for me to see through the raft windows to watch for snags and observe the general flow of the river. So I sat on this little seat, and with the boat now going in reverse, I had turned it around, and instead of sitting on the back deck with the motor, the motor was now, in effect, on the front deck. It made it easy to see where we were going, although I had to be very careful not to let the motor hit anything, as there was no protection for the propeller.



It requires different tactics to steer with the motor at the front of the boat, because now you have the tail following where you are putting the boat, instead of steering to send the front in one direction by sending the back in the other direction. Not difficult when you work it out, but Bill still kept thinking I was driving a bit like a rally driver (with the motor virtually on idle and only going just a trifle faster than the current this was a bit of a joke!) As I tried to explain to him at the time, you have to keep the motor pointed in the direction you want to go, but the tail of the boat swings around. So you might actually be going sideways, crabbing, facing sideways to the current, but the boat is still moving in the direction that the motor is pointing, even though the boat may not be facing that direction. You work with the current, and don’t try to fight it – in fact you let it work for you.

We did 40 km in the one day, backwards, and it was a very long day. When you are doing 4 km an hour, it was basically 10 hours on the go – sitting on the folding toilet seat, steering the boat backwards. We stopped for 15 minutes for a

bite of lunch and that was about it. It was fine most of the time, but there were a few strong gusts of wind, and trying to deal with the wind, and the current, and going backwards, and the raft following whichever way it wanted behind - it was one of life's little challenges, but we got there.

We decided to push it to get close to Cobram, because at one stage we got a brief phone signal, not strong enough to be able to phone out, but enough to tell us there were 5 messages waiting in the messagebank. (When you have parents in their nineties back home, as well as children and grandchildren, you worry a bit if you are out of contact for long. I can manage a few days but anything longer than 24 hours has Bill starting to imagine the worst on all fronts!) Once we got close enough to town to get a signal we downloaded the messages and they weren't generally that important, but we were able to let everyone know we were safe and sound. The last time we had been seen was several days earlier at Zanettis Beach where Kent watched us disappearing around the corner after bouncing alarmingly off snags, with very little control over the raft. But by now I really felt at home with the raft, the river, the current and the motor – even if it was only going in reverse!

The next morning we motored the remaining couple of kilometres into Cobram, and decided to moor at what was effectively a maritime caravan park. About 300-400 metres upstream of the road bridge there were about a dozen houseboats moored against the bank, some of them accessed by a couple of small jetties which protruded a small way into the river. So I had to bring the raft around, amidst all these houseboats, into a space only half as long again as our raft, against the current, and sidle up to the only vacant pontoon beside one of the jetties. A difficult task at the best of times, but with the motor sticking out from the front of the vessel you can't afford to ram the motor (with the propeller protruding foremost) into the pontoon. And you can't just aim it where you want to go and throw it into reverse so it doesn't bang into things. You have to knock the engine into neutral at a time that you think you will still float into where you want to go – if you have judged the speed, the current and the wind correctly. And those elements can all be quite variable – a gust of wind, an eddie, a patch of quiet water.....

Lo had to use the current as the brake, and to judge how much current there was. As we nosed in, I was standing with the boathook ready to fend us off in the event of an over-enthusiastic approach, but such was the skipper's expertise that all I had to do was pick up the rope and step onto the landing pontoon – we didn't even touch – I just stepped ashore and tied us up. And given that the nose of the raft ended up a foot away from the houseboat next to us...I reckon it was pretty good. I suppose we're keen to mention this example of maritime prowess because we still cringe to think what abject idiots we must have looked the last time Kent saw us after we left him at Zanetti's Beach, blundering down the river, cannoning off snags and completely out of control.

AT COBRAM

Anyway, we got to Cobram and tied up. It was about 10am on Monday – almost a week since we left Yarrawonga. Impatient as ever, almost immediately I went ashore to try to find someone to help with the motor. We were not exactly in the middle of town. The town itself was some three Ks away, and we were in an obviously new residential development out of town – Cherrybrook-type houses built along the road that runs beside the river – McMansions – the Nob Hill of Cobram. As I walked up the slope from the jetty where the raft was tied up I saw a bloke trying to manhandle a big lump of timber into his car on the public reserve side of the road. I walked up to him and gave him a hand in with it and then I told him how we were placed, and immediately he offered to help. His name was Morrie. We jumped into his spotless Commodore and drove to his spotless house a couple of Ks away in another brand new housing estate where every house seemed to be surrounded by an overabundance of azaleas, and dropped off the big piece of tree-branch. Then we drove another four or five Ks up to the main highway to a place that sold aluminium runabouts, outboard motors and fishing gear. It was called *The Happy Hooker*. I told the bloke there what my problem was, but he couldn't help as he was by himself and had a lot of jobs on. But he took us over to a motor on the back of one of his boats to show us what he thought the problem was, and what we should do to try to fix it. As we left he came over and gave me his business card. "If you still haven't got it sorted by about four o'clock this arvo give me a ring and I'll see if I can drop down and have a look at it on my way home". People in the country really do seem to try to be more helpful than their city counterparts.



So we came back, and took the lid off the motor. Morrie used to tinker with his own cars and had a bit of an idea how things should go, and he had a bit of a fiddle, but after about half an hour's poking about we still couldn't get it to go into gear. So Morrie made his apologetic way home for lunch.

Then a car came past with a trailer. It was a bloke cutting up fallen timber along the riverbank. He was a funny little cove of European extraction called Mannie, and he never stopped complaining about anything he could think of all the time I was with him. He was even worse than me. After I'd filled him in on our circumstances I asked him who he would suggest might be able to help us. I pointed out that whoever it was would have to come down to where we were moored and fix it *in situ*. His response was to take me to see Ben, who lived in one of the fancy houses across the road. I managed to work out from the litany of lamentation that poured out of Mannie that Ben had done him a good turn at some stage in the past, and Mannie idolised him for it. He bade me wait at the front gate while he went in to tell Ben about our predicament and clear the way for me to be granted an audience with the Big Man. After about twenty minutes Mannie came back out and ushered me in through the front door, and what a big man indeed was Ben. He was sitting in the large lounge room in one of those leather recliner chairs that lifts you to your feet with the press of a lever. Bald head, stubble that wasn't a fashion statement, bloodshot eyes, and a gut of truly impressively vast proportions. Sprouting from his voluminous shorts was a pair of calves that looked like jeroboams, finished off with the inevitable pair of thongs.

The lounge room was furnished the way I suspect most of these new brick-veneer faux Federation homages to consumerism are furnished – with execrable taste (at least to my mind it was). There was a curved bar in one corner with knick knacks all around it, and four long-legged bamboo stools in front of the vinyl upholstered façade. Behind the bar itself was more glassware than you'd see in the *Ship Inn*. It was an open-plan house and I could see his wife busying herself in the kitchen, but nobody made any move to bring her into the conversation and she stayed where she apparently knew her place to be.

Mannie was hovering to one side in a manner that suggested that he was having difficulty not tugging at his forelock. I never found out what was the origin of his feelings of indebtedness. Ben was a man of few words, but he was affable enough. I had to tell him about our motor trouble all over again, so God knows what Mannie was telling him for the twenty minutes I was waiting outside to be admitted. Ben sat in silence for some time, digesting what I'd told him, and then he almost oracularly delivered his piece of advice.

“What you gotta do is go up to town and get Jimmy Stokes to have a look at it. He does outboard motors. You'll see his Auto Electrics place on the way into town. He's also the RACV bloke for Cobram, so if you can't find it easy then look for the RACV sign. You can't miss it.” I was pleased to get the advice, but it didn't seem to quite live up to the portentousness with which he proffered it. I also found myself wondering why Mannie couldn't have told me this, instead of putting me through all this business, and concluded that he must have seen it as a chance to have more contact with his hero.

“I can run you up there if you like.” Mannie volunteered, and I hastily accepted the offer. After a bit more inconsequential chit-chat Mannie and I took our leave, and I backed out the door in a cloud of thank-yous. I felt fairly sure that Ben would have had to have made his pile by nefarious means, but that was probably only because he looked for all the world like everyone's stereotype of an enforcer for the Mafia. And as if to give the lie to my unsavoury impression of him he called out as we went down the steps: “There's an old push bike round the back you can borrow to go uptown if you find you're here for a few days and need some provisions.” Like I said, country people in general tend to be more

spontaneously helpful than city folk. Mind you, the thought of Ben straddling a pushbike stretched my imagination more than somewhat.

Mannie drove me up to the Auto Electrician's, grumbling about how he never saw his wife these days because she was always down the club on the pokies or playing Bingo. Listening to Mannie's seamless sourness I had an idea why she might prefer Bingo at the club.

Country people may be helpful, but the downside of country ways is how long it takes to get even the simplest things done. After a long wait to be attended to, and another even longer wait for The Boss to come to the counter from out the back, we left Jim Stokes' place with an assurance that somebody would be down to look at the motor that afternoon. "Give us a ring if nobody's come by four o'clock" Stokes yelled out as we went out the door.

I stayed on the raft during the time Bill was with Mannie. There was not a lot of activity down on the water. The houseboats were all moored at what I presumed were their permanent moorings, but only one looked like it was permanently occupied. Some looked pretty decrepit, as if they had not had anyone near them for some time. We thought we were a basic home-built job, but some of these were really rough. And others were quite smart. One had pot plants on the front deck and looked rather elaborately done up, but I learned later that was because it had been used for a wedding the previous weekend. You get to know all sorts of things out in the bush. I can't remember the details of the wedding, but I am sure I was told at the time.

Because we were holed up for a couple of days getting the new hulls on, and another day with bad weather, we had taken a bit longer to get to Cobram than we'd anticipated – I had originally thought we had enough food to last until Tocumwal, another 20 km downstream, and although we certainly wouldn't have starved between Cobram and there, I decided we might as well stock up while we could. I got a shopping list ready, but as Bill said it is a 2-3 km walk up to the town – which is a fair distance for me, and I was wondering if I should venture on such a journey. (Borrowing Ben's bike might have been just as challenging.) One of the boats moored right next to us had a sign on it saying Cobram River Cruises, and the people who run the cruises came down about 11:30 or so as they were taking a cruise out later in the day. They were a bit surprised to see us moored there – I suppose, after all, these moorings would be effectively private property as people would have to fork out to some government agency or other to permanently moor their boat there. I had a chat to them – husband and wife – and when they asked a few questions about where we were from I told them our story. They said they had to take the cruise out soon, but that they would be back about 3:30 and if I wanted a lift up town to get some provisions they would give me a lift up then.

About an hour later they went past on their cruise and gave us a little toot. Our story and situation, and how we came 50 km downstream in reverse apparently provided additional entertainment for the passengers on the cruise.

When the cruise boat arrived back and was safely moored, I was ushered up to their big 4WD, and driven up to the local supermarket. I thanked them profusely and assumed I would find my own way back to the raft. But no! They wanted to know roughly how long I needed, and if there were other places in town I

wanted to go. They insisted they would come back in an hour and take me back to the raft. Not only did they take me back, they carried the shopping from the car to the raft for me! Country people really are something else when it comes to helpfulness and hospitality. And of course, it is such a small world when you are out here. It turned out that these people were the son and daughter-in-law of Ben, the local commissar with whom Bill had been granted an audience. And a couple of days later, when we were talking to a bloke down in Tocumwal, it turned out that he was the bloke they had bought their cruise boat from. Like I said, it is a small world in the big country.

It was sunny and very pleasant when Mannie dropped me back at the raft. He had to go off and pick up his wife from the club and drag her away from the pokies so he'd get some lunch, and his parting shot was: "I'll drop by this afternoon later on and have a beer with yez." It was a statement rather than a question. He was a very lonely bloke, we decided.

After we'd had our lunch one of those big, tank-like Ford pick-ups drove down the track to the ramp, and disgorged a large lump of a fellow dressed in regulation rural rig – plaid shirt, moleskins, RM Williams boots... and a fucking baseball cap, of course. I've never understood how this dawky American fashion caught on in rural Australia, given that the baseball cap is useless as a sunshade compared to an Akubra. I thought he might be the motor man from Stokes', so I walked up the jetty ramp and said g'day. It turned out that he wasn't from Stokes', but owned one of the houseboats moored near us and he'd dropped by to check on it. He seemed happy to yarn for a bit. His houseboat was a big one, and he'd been as far as Swan Hill and back on it. We talked a little of snags: "Oh well," he grinned, "I don't reckon anyone travels far on the Murray without hitting a snag. I know I've bounced off plenty in my time." It went through my mind that hitting a snag with a steel-hulled vessel of some 4 1/2 tonnes displacement was a rather less hazardous event than doing it with an eggshell-hulled vessel like we'd started out with, but I refrained from entertaining him with our shipwreck adventures lest we be seen as a complete idiots, and thus reinforce his probable prejudices about droobs from the city.

"I hit several in the Barmah Choke when I was bringing the houseboat up here. I'd say the Choke would be the snaggiest and narrowest part of the Murray, actually. It shouldn't be too bad for you to get through, though. The river's not as low now as it was then, and you're nothing like as big as this thing (gesturing towards his houseboat, which had several seedy-looking potted palms on the top deck.) He assumed we'd just stopped for a breather in the course of our trip down the river. "You know," he volunteered, "Cobram's not the best place to stop for supplies. It's too far away from the river. You'd be better off at Tocumwal. You can just about tie up outside the general store there." We knew this from our reconnaissance trip earlier in the year, but I let him go on. "There's a young bloke who's planning to live here on his houseboat, but he's going to buy a tinnie to run down to Tocumwal to get his supplies because he reckons that's easier than going all the way to the shops and back here. There's no permanent mooring down there for houseboats like there is here." After a few more pleasantries he ambled back to his truck and took off.

When I went back to the raft Lo and I sat waiting for the motor man to arrive, even though it was still only about 2 o'clock. It was quite hot in the sun, but there was a pleasant breeze. At one stage Lorraine said to me: "D'you suppose it might void our warranty on this motor if we let just anyone have a go at it? We've got good mobile reception here, why don't we give the people we

bought it from a ring just to be on the safe side?" We already knew that there was no chance of getting the motor to a Suzuki dealer because the man at *The Happy Hooker* had mentioned that morning that he used to be a dealer but was no longer, and that the nearest dealer was at Corowa, which was about 120 kms in the wrong direction. The phone number of the people we'd bought it from was on a sticker on the motor cover, so I gave them a call and explained the situation. They put me through to the head honcho mechanic in their service department, who initially confirmed our worst suspicions that only a Suzuki dealer could touch it if we didn't want to void our warranty. I was adamant that this was impossible, and that we had no choice but to do what we'd arranged with Stokes, and pointedly mentioned that we'd bought a brand-new motor so things like this wouldn't happen. So then he suggested that I might be able to fix it myself there and then, and that he'd talk me through what to do to find out what the trouble was and fix it. I pointed out the contradiction in his insistence that only a dealer could touch it on the one hand, but on the other he was prepared to let a layman like me have a go at it. "Besides," I finished, "we're about to head into a long stretch of the Murray where we'll be incommunicado for about a week, and there's no way I'm going to tackle a stretch like that with a motor that's been repaired by a mechanical moron – namely, me." I stuck to my guns, and our conversation became more and more peppered with expletives, and in the end he agreed to ring Jim Stokes, presumably to check on his credentials. I didn't really understand why he wanted to do this, but I suspect it was a way for him to hang up without losing face. Then he rang back to say I'd have to pay Stokes for the repair, but to keep the docket and claim it under warranty when we got back.

About half-past three a young bloke came striding purposefully down the ramp with a toolbox in tow. He removed a rubber grommet from one side of the motor, adjusted a small nut inside, started the motor, made sure it went into forward gear properly, turned it off, and put the grommet back. The whole process had taken no more than ten minutes. I had to give him time to get back to Stokes to tell them what the job had involved and then ring them to pay by Bankcard, which we did. Forty eight bucks. Even though that meant that Stokes was charging out the young bloke's time and expertise at more than \$280 an hour we weren't about to complain. (We were to find out twelve months later that Stokes was a dab hand at making a few bucks out of you if you were in a jam and he had you over a barrel. They were very friendly while they were doing it, though). But the motor worked properly again and that was all that mattered. It was easy to fix, but only if you knew what you were doing. After he'd gone I rang the bloke at *The Happy Hooker* to tell him we were out of trouble, and that we wouldn't be needing him to drop by on his way home. The least I could do, given his generous offer.

Around 4:30 Mannie arrived with two stubbies of beer to join us for a drink as he'd earlier threatened. I interrupted his flow of bleak anecdotes with a few questions to try to winkle a bit about his life out of him. I thought he was a central European, but it turned out he was Maltese, and came to Australia when he was 21. Beyond that I couldn't establish much. Our desultory conversation was interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Ben, who came lumbering down the ramp to the jetty with the speed of a glacier. As he lurched onto the aft deck, out of the corner of my eye I saw Lo quickly move to the opposite side and out onto the bow deck. She told me later she feared the back would go underwater, because he really was a huge man. Christ only knows what would have happened if we'd still had the cat hulls on! Ben brought nothing, and wouldn't accept anything to drink from us. He must have just come down to check out the raft. He

said his wife might join us later. She was apparently profoundly deaf and was waiting at home for the delivery of a hearing dog. I didn't know people had hearing dogs, and when I mentioned this to Ben he said that not many people did, and launched into a series of stories about people being thrown off buses and out of places where dogs weren't welcome, even though seeing-eye dogs were always allowed. (If it's 'seeing-eye dogs', why isn't it 'hearing-ear' dogs?). She joined us for a little while after about half an hour and proved to be no slouch as a lip-reader, but they all pushed off after another fifteen minutes or so. We didn't really have all that much to talk about.

The next morning was just beautiful. A light mist hung low over the water for about an hour after sun-up, then a warm, windless morning gently got itself into gear.

Lorraine had no trouble getting us out of our snug-fitting berth against the jetty now that she could go both forwards and backwards at will. Given the chance I think she would have left a wake like a zigzag sewing machine, just because she now could. We set off downstream after a leisurely breakfast, but we'd only gone about a kilometre when we came to a superb beach on a big bend. White sand, an expanse of mown grass the size of a couple of football fields, and over the back where the trees started again we could make out a toilet block. The map told us that this was Thompson's Beach, and it was obviously used a great deal by the Cobram townfolk. There were people walking dogs on leashes, taking their morning constitutionals, three people yarning mid-walk, a weird guy in a long black robe with a cowl sitting motionless doing his meditation – you'd be tempted to say it was Breugelesque except that the clothes were all wrong, though the guy in the cowled robe would have been OK. We made a gentle landfall and tied up to a tree that looked as if it had grown there specially for us to tie up to. I went to investigate the dunny block and hastened back to Lo with the good news that there were showers in there as well as dunnies, and that the showers were hot!

We took turns to luxuriate in a hot shower, then I steeled myself to take the Porta-Potti up to the toilet block to empty it. This was the first time on the trip that we'd had to go through this process, and I wasn't much looking forward to it. I read the instructions on the side before I took it into the gloom of the toilet cubicle, and did all the things I thought it said to do. I tipped it towards the bowl but nothing came out. Then I realised that there was a button that I hadn't pressed, so, with the outlet tube still tilted towards the toilet bowl, I reached around and pushed the button. Oh shit! (to coin a phrase). A gruesome gruel of foetid faeces hurled itself from the opening and glopped into the bowl, and, wouldn't you know it, splashed all around the rim of the bowl as well. The stench was award-winning. It took several minutes for it to empty, and then another ten or fifteen minutes for me to mop up the mess I'd made. There was a tap on the wall outside the cubicle and I used about half a roll of loo paper to get the place de-pooed. I was really glad that nobody came in while I was engaged in this delightful occupation, and hightailed it back to the raft to put the PP away and out of sight so there was no connection between us and the breathtaking miasma that now hung all around the toilet block.

We dawdled at Thompson's Beach until about 11am, and just as we were getting ready to head off again, a convoy of boats came past, 15 of them (Lo says

8). All little tinnies, each with one person in. Some of them had bimini covers, and some of them were just open, It was all blokes, all going about 8 knots, so they were moving along. Most of them had a canvas cover over the front half of the boat, where we figured their gear must have been stowed, as well as their swags and food and, presumably, grog. They were doing the Murray in a rather more speedy fashion than we were doing it. All the boats looked brand new, all the canvas looked brand new, and all the motors looked brand new. Lo wondered if it was some (ad)venture sponsored by one of the outback magazines.

Several Ks down the river we found another nice little beach to stop and have some lunch, and while we were having coffee suddenly there was this weird whooshing sound. We had no idea what it could be, and it was getting louder. It sounded like a well-silenced fighter jet circling around behind the trees, really close. As we looked up, a flock of about 50 little black cormorants came wheeling around the bend, following the course of the river, and their fifty pairs of wings were producing the noise. It was the oddest sound. But what was even odder was that about 5 minutes later they came back up the river again – but this time they made hardly any sound at all as they went past and back around the bend. Why? Search me. Another outback mystery, I guess.

We tied up that afternoon at what turned out to be a very crumbly bank where a forest of red gums marched right down to within about ten feet of the water's edge. Later on, as dusk approached, we realised that we must have chosen to camp under a favourite roosting spot of the biggest mob of sulphur-crested cockatoos you ever came cross. They made an unbelievable racket until just after dark, and at first light they all started squawking again, and were still carrying on as we left after breakfast. Lorraine reckons that every member of a flock of corellas or cockatoos has to squawk "Good morning" to every other member of the mob every morning and evening. It certainly seemed that way.



The next morning was not one of Bill's better mornings, so he had a bit of a lie in, and I did a few domestics. It was very windy and I was not in a hurry to move as we had to be careful getting out of where we were moored, because immediately downstream of us was an overhanging tree, plus a snag. With our beautiful new hulls we could have managed the snag OK, even if we had bumped into it, but the overhanging tree branch would have torn the superstructure right off. When the wind eased a bit I managed to reverse out diagonally and get away from it. According to the map that section of the river was the most snaggy – on the map it looked quite horrendous, but in fact it was quite reasonable.

The day was another one of lovely scenery, beautiful beaches, and hardly any one to be seen. We were overtaken by a boat – another little tinnie, right out in the middle of nowhere. Where it came from or where it was going goodness only knows – it never came back again.



We did see a lot of beautiful camping places along the beaches. I find it difficult to believe that we have come down here with the campertrailer as often as we have, and not found more than we did. I mean we have found quite a few, but none as good as some we have seen. There are some really brilliant ones. Every bend has a good beach on it, and there is a camp at every second or third one. Some of them are just caravans or tents, with no cars or people around. The people must just drive out for the weekend or something. But all sorts of people and all sorts of setups. Like there was an elderly Landrover troopcarrier – a bit of a banger, and the bloke that was in that was sleeping under a bit of blue polytarp. You know, a rope between two trees and a bit of polytarp. No ends in it. And he was sleeping in there quite happily.
