

## THE CHILDREN

He was almost ready to go when I found him. He was, to be exact, engaged in putting the final lashings onto his big truck. Blackened and blistered, and loaded up with all his worldly possessions, it was backed right up to a dry old verandah littered with dead leaves and odds and ends of rubbish. He turned to me as I got near, his bloodshot eyes squinting at me with frank hostility.

'Another newshawk.'

'The *Weekly*, Mr Allen.'

His expression softened a little. 'I've got nothing against the *Weekly*.'

'We thought there might be something more to it,' I said gently. 'We know the dailies never tell a straight story.'

'They did this time,' he replied. 'I'm not making excuses.'

With the dexterity of a man who did it every day, he tied a sheepshank\*, ran the end of the rope through a ring under the decking, up through the eye of the knot, and back to the ring.

'I've got something to answer for all right,' he said with tight lips. 'But nobody need worry, I'll pay! I'll pay for it all the rest of my life. I'm that way now I can't bear the sight of my own kids.'

I kept silent for a moment. 'We understand that, Mr Allen. We just thought there might be something that hasn't come out yet.'

'No, I wouldn't say there's anything that hasn't come out. It's just that – well, people don't think enough, they don't think, that's all.'

He was facing me now, and looking very much, in his immobility, a part of the great background of desolation. The marks of fire were all over him. Charred boots, burned patches on his clothes, singed eyebrows, blistered face and hands, little crusts all over his hat where sparks had fallen. Over his shoulder the sun was just rising between Hunter and Mabooda Hills\*, a monstrous ball of copper glowing

and fading behind the waves of smoke still drifting up from the valley. Fifty yards away the dusty track marked the western limit of destruction. The ground on this side of it was the first brown earth I had seen since leaving Burt's Creek; Allen's house the first survivor after a tragic procession of stark chimney stacks and overturned water tanks.

'It must have been hell!' I said.

'That?' He made a gesture of indifference. 'That's nothing. It'll come good again. It's the children.'

'I know.'

The door of the house opened. I saw a woman with children at her skirts. She jumped as she caught sight of me, and in an instant the door banged, leaving me with an impression of whirling skirts and large frightened eyes.

'The wife's worse than me,' said Allen, 'she can't face anybody.'

He was looking away from me now, frowning and withdrawn, in the way of a man living something all over again, something he can't leave alone. I could think of nothing to say which wouldn't sound offensively platitudinous. It was the most unhappy assignment I had ever been given. I couldn't get out of my mind the hatred in the faces of some men down on the main road when I'd asked to be directed to the Allen home.

I took out my cigarettes, and was pleased when he accepted one. A man won't do that if he has decided not to talk to you.

'How did it come to be you?' I asked. 'Did Vince order you to go, or did you volunteer?' Vince was the foreman ranger in that part of the Dandenongs.

'I didn't ask him, if that's what you mean. I don't work for the Commission\*. The truck's my living, I'm a carrier. But everybody's in on a fire, and Vince is in charge.'

'Vince picked you . . .'

'He picked me because I had the truck with me. I'd been down

to the Gully to bring up more men, and it was parked on the break\*.'

'Then it isn't true . . .'

'That I looked for the job because of my own kids? No! That's a damned lie. I didn't even have cause to be worried about my own kids just then. I'm not trying to get out of it, but there's plenty to blame besides me: the Forestry Commission, the Education Department and everybody in Burt's Creek and Yileena if it comes to that. Those children should never have been there to begin with. They should have been sent down to the Gully on Friday or kept in their homes. The fire was on this side of the reserve right up to noon.'

He wheeled, pointing towards the distant top of Wanga Hill. Through the drifting haze of smoke we could make out the little heap of ruins closely ringed by black and naked spars that had been trees. Here and there along the very crest, where the road ran, the sun glinted now and then on the windscreens of standing cars, morbid sightseers from the city.

'Just look at it!' he said vehemently. 'Timber right up to the fence-lines! A school in a half-acre paddock – in country like this!'

His arm fell. 'But what's the use of talking? I was told to go and get the kids out, and I didn't do it. I got my own. Nothing else matters now.'

'You thought there was time to pick up your own children first, and then go on to the school, Mr Allen?'

'That's about the size of it,' he assented gloomily.

I'd felt all along that he did want to talk to somebody about it. It came now with a rush.

'Nut it out\* for yourself,' he appealed. 'What your paper says isn't going to make anybody think any different now. But I'll tell you this: there isn't another bloke in the world would have done anything else. I should be shot – I wish to God they would shoot me! – but I'm still no worse than anybody else. I was the one it happened to,

that's all. Them people who lost kids have got a perfect right to hate my guts, but supposing it had been one of them? Supposing it had been you . . . what would you have done?

I just looked at him.

'You know, don't you? In your own heart you know?'

'Yes, I know.'

'The way it worked out you'd think somebody had laid a trap for me. Vince had got word that the fire had jumped the main road and was working up the far side of Wanga. And he told me to take the truck and make sure the kids had been got away from the school. All right – now follow me. I get started. I come along the low road there. I get the idea right away that I'll pick up my own wife and kids afterwards. But when I reach that bit of open country near Hagen's bridge when you can see Wanga, I look up. And, so help me God! there's smoke. Now that can mean only one thing: that the Burt's Creek leg of the fire has jumped the Government break and is heading this way. Think that one over. I can see the very roof of my house, and there's smoke showing at the back of it. I know there's scrub right up to the fences, and I've got a wife and kids there. The other way there's twenty kids, but there's no smoke showing yet. And the wind's in the north-east. And I'm in a good truck. And there's a fair track right through from my place to the school. What would you expect me to do?'

He would see the answer in my face.

'There was the choice,' he said with dignified finality. 'One way, my own two kids. The other way, twenty kids that weren't mine. That's how everybody sees it, just as simple as that.'

'When did you first realise you were too late for the school?'

'As soon as I pulled up here. My wife had seen me coming and was outside with the kids and a couple of bundles. She ran up to the truck as I stopped, shouting and pointing behind me.' He closed his eyes and shivered. 'When I put my head out at the side and

looked back I couldn't see the school. A bloke just above the creek had a lot of fern and blackberry cut, all ready for burning off. The fire had got into that and was right across the bottom of Wanga in the time it took me to get to my place from the road. The school never had a hope. Some of the kids got up as far as the road, but it's not very wide and there was heavy fern right out to the metal.'

I waited, while he closed his eyes and shook his head slowly from side to side.

'I'd have gone through, though, just the same, if it hadn't been for the wife. She'll tell you. We had a fight down there where the tracks branch. I had the truck flat out and headed for Wanga. I knew what it meant, but I'd have done it. I got it into my head there was nothing else to do but cremate the lot, truck and everything in it. But the wife grabbed the wheel. It's a wonder we didn't leave the road.'

'You turned back . . .'

'Yes, damn my soul! I turned back. There was fire everywhere. Look at the truck. The road was alight both sides all the way back to Hagen's. Just the same, it would have been better if we'd gone on.'

That, I felt, was the simple truth, his own two innocents notwithstanding. I had an impulse to ask him what happened when he reached Burt's Creek, but restrained myself. His shame was painful to witness.

A minute or two later I said goodbye. He was reluctant to take my hand.

'I kept trying to tell myself somebody else might have got the kids out,' he whispered. 'But nobody did. Word had got around somehow that the school had been evacuated. Only the teacher – they found her with a bunch of them half a mile down the road. And to top it all off my own place got missed! That bit of cultivation down there – you wouldn't read about it, would you?'

No, you wouldn't read about it.

In the afternoon, at the Gully, standing near the ruins of the hotel, I saw him passing. A big fire-scarred truck rolling slowly down the debris-littered road. Behind the dirty windscreen one could just discern the hunted faces of a man and woman. Two children peeped out of a torn side-curtain. Here and there people searching the ashes of their homes stood upright and watched with hard and bitter faces.