

COLIN THIELE



CLASSICS

River Murray
Mary

Mary's father and all his neighbours were called 'Soldier Settlers'. She had been born in 1918 after he had been sent home wounded from the Great World War. He had been in a place called the Western Front, and although he never talked about it she had overheard her aunts gossiping about it to her mother. When the soldiers had come home the government had cleared some of the

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scrub from the banks of the River Murray and cut up the land into blocks for orchards and vineyards. Then the engineers had built pumping stations and irrigation channels so that the new soldier farmers could grow oranges and apricots and sultana grapes where there had been nothing but low scrub and arid plains before.

It was a good idea but it was very hard work. In the winter months there was pruning and ploughing to do, and in summer there was picking and dipping and drying. The dipping was the worst part. It had to be done in a tank full of very hot water mixed with caustic soda. Mary's father bricked in a tank and left a space underneath for the fire. Then he carted loads and loads of wood until he had a big heap beside the tank.

When picking time came they all helped. The sultana grapes were picked into special square buckets with holes in them,

and carried up to the dipping tank on a horse-drawn trolley. Her father stood beside the tank and dipped each bucket into the steaming hot mixture; then he hung it on a stick lying across the top of the tank while it drained, and grabbed the next bucket. Another man spread the grapes on trays to dry in the sun. Every now and then her father called 'More wood, Mary,' and she ran to stoke up the fire.

It was dreadful work in the heat of summer without shelter or shade, but it was the only way the sultanas could be made to dry into soft golden fruit for cakes and puddings and buns all over the world. If the grapes were just left to dry without dipping they became hard and blue and useless.

Mary watched her father at the dip. The muscles on his arms bulged firm and hard as he swung each bucket up, plunged it down, and then lifted it out to drain. The perspiration

ran down his forehead and stung his eyes, but he kept on working. Sometimes he dipped more than a thousand buckets in a single day, and on those occasions when evening fell he said his back felt like a broken banana.

Mary liked lunch time best. They all sat in the shade — she and the hired pickers, and her mother and father — and opened a big basket of sandwiches and pies and cake and fruit. There was hot black tea in the harvest can and cold water in the big waterbag hanging under the tree. When she wanted a drink she just took the enamelled mug that stood on the top of the waterbag, unhooked the canvas pipe that bent upwards like an elbow from the bottom of the bag, and poured herself a pannikin of sweet cool water. She liked the taste of it better than any other drink in the world — as if it had been hauled up out of the deep cool earth by an Arab camel driver with a bucket made of hessian and goatskins.

Her mother worked beside the pickers, wearing a wide floppy hat to protect her face as she went snip-snip up and down the trellised rows. The bunches of grapes tumbled into the bucket and the flesh on her arms bounced and shook like jelly as she worked. But Mary seldom had much time to watch.

'Fire, Mary,' her father would call. 'Stoke up the fire.' And she would haul out some logs from the woodheap, red-backed spiders and all, and push them into the fire.

But at last the harvest was over for another year. Then her father lifted her up on his tired shoulders and jigged three times round the dipping tank, singing a special song he had made up himself:

*'Take it or chuck it
We've done the last bucket,
So fiddle-de-dee
We can go on the spree.*

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*Throw down your dippers
And pocket your snippers,
And get your old slippers
And come dancing with me.'*

He sang this song every year while Mary's mother leaned against an apricot tree laughing her sides out, and all the hired pickers in coloured dresses and white bonnets, and battered felt hats and singlets and mole-skin trousers, formed a circle round the tank and clapped their hands and chanted 'hooray, hooray'.

In spite of the hard work and the hot sun they were strong and brown and healthy. And they were all happy.



It all began with rumours and stories. Far away in the eastern mountains of Australia,

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... thousands of kilometres up the tributaries of the Murray and the Murrumbidgee and the Darling, it had been pouring with rain. Gutters were turning into drains, and drains were becoming creeks, and creeks were becoming rivers. There was water cascading down the steep mountain streams, water pouring from cliffs and canyons, water raging white and angry in the gorges. And it was all making for the plains where sooner or later it had to find its way into the Murray.

Meanwhile, far off in South Australia where the Murray was snoozing in the sunshine or meandering slowly past billabongs and vineyards, people began to pick up stories and nod their heads wisely and make prophecies.

'A high river this year,' Mr Carter said one day; 'they say it'll be down here in a couple of months.'

'Big vater komming,' old Abel told Mary;

'vrom all d' udder blaces it is already running down.'

'There's a big flood up river,' Mrs Hutchins said in the store. 'They say it's still rising at Albury.'

But the eastern mountains were a long way off and the river ran slowly in South Australia. The blue cranes stood like carved birds of stone in the backwaters, the wild duck flew fast and free over the swamplands, and the cockatoos burst shrieking out of the redgums like handfuls of white paper thrown up into the sky. And the great cliffs towering above the western bends glowed and dozed in the noonday sunlight. It was peaceful in South Australia.

'They've opened up the gates in the weir,' Mary's father announced at the tea table one night. 'They must be expecting a lot of water from Victoria.'

'They say it's miles wide at Swan Hill,'

Mr Turner said, scratching his chin like a prophet; 'it looks like an inland sea.'

'You haff seen nutting,' said Abel. 'Ven I vos a young man I sailed my paddle sip over d' gardens and paddocks. Such a big vlood it vos you could not even d' river see. It vos all vater. Nutting but vater.'

'They say it's a very big flood this time,' Mary said timidly, 'at least in Victoria and New South Wales.'

The first signs came so stealthily that they took Mary by surprise. She went down to the landing one morning and was amazed to find the track by the reeds awash and the logs covered by water. She ran home to tell her father.

'I know,' he said. 'It's coming. From now on we must always tie the dinghy to a tree, or one of these days when we wake up it will be half way down the river to Goolwa.'

The flood seemed to be coming in

secret. Sometimes nothing happened for a day or two, and then there would be a big change overnight. Mary hammered a stake into the mud at the water's edge to act as a signpost. Sometimes she could leave it there for several days, but sometimes she had to move it back up the bank twice a day. The river seemed to rise and pause, rise and pause, as if it couldn't make up its mind. But it never fell.

The biggest shock came one Saturday when she ran down to the dinghy to row over to Pimpoota. Trickle was spilling over the narrow neck of land between the two billabongs, and there was a thin skin of water across the track in three places. She raced back to the house.

'Dad,' she shouted. 'Dad, it's across the track.'

'I've been expecting it,' he said. 'Now we'll have to shift the dinghy or it'll be cut

off.' So they took the trolley and hauled the boat slowly across the flats to the edge of the bank in front of the house. He drove a steel post firmly into the ground and tied the mooring rope to it.

'Now let the water rise,' he said. 'We'll have a boat ready at the front door.'

The next day Mr Carter and his son, Ben, came trundling past with a wagon and a big winch.

'Have to rescue my engine and pump,' he said glumly, 'or they'll both be ruined. Didn't think I'd have to shift them so soon.'

He wasn't the only one who had to move things away from the river. Farmers with dairy herds were rounding up their cattle and driving them to higher ground, families with shacks on the riverbank were carting away furniture and crockery, and old Abel was shifting house altogether. He had a hut by the lagoon where he liked to live, and

a house on the bank where he fled in emergencies.

'My low house I leave, my high house I go to,' he said to Mary. 'And if the vlood komms over everything, den I am like Noah and I live on my ark.'

'You're lucky,' Mary said. 'Even if the flood covered the whole of Australia you'd be safe on *Backwater Bessie*.'

And then at last the flood came down like a whipcrack. It no longer crept up in secret, a centimetre at a time. It wolfed up landmarks by armlengths and metres. All the low-lying flats were covered by a sea of water. The trees became islands, sometimes in long rows showing where the riverbank had once been, sometimes in lonely knots where they had sheltered a shady nook by the lagoons or billabongs.

The water rose steadily up the sides of the wharf at Pimpoota, higher and higher

each day, until it lapped against the deck. Then it spilled over the heavy planks, submerged them utterly, and flowed out into the loading yard, nibbling its way up the steep, curving road to the town.

In the middle of the river the current increased. Now, if they wanted to cross to Pimpoota, her father rowed up the eastern shore above the flatlands where the billabongs had once been, over the reeds and bushes far beneath them, past Mr Carter's pumphouse pipe sticking up forlornly like a forgotten marker post, until he was a long way up the river. Then he launched out for the opposite shore, rowing strongly and letting the current carry them in a wide arc towards the town.

'It's getting dangerous,' he said one day as he arrived back, panting. 'The water's so muddy that you can't see a thing. One of these days I'll be torpedoed by a log

or carried off in the branches of a floating tree.'

The flood was becoming a monster. Every day the water rose higher and higher. Towns further upstream were being cut off. Renmark was surrounded, and houses in low-lying parts had water pouring through their windows. Sometimes only the roofs could be seen, sitting on the water like square mushrooms without stems. There were pictures in the papers taken by daredevils in aeroplanes showing shining seas of water spreading endlessly as far as they could see.

'We're luckier than most,' Mary's father said, peering out over the flood from the verandah of their house. 'We and the Carters. We've got the highest spot in the district.'

'It's getting awfully close,' Mary said. 'I could kick my shoe into it from here.'

'You don't wear it often enough to do that,' her mother answered, laughing.

The water was still rising, but not quite so quickly.

'I think we might just scrape by,' her father said. 'It might reach the doorstep but I don't think it'll get into the house.'

'How can you be sure?'

'The river's peaking. When it reaches the peak it might hang for a week or so, and then it'll start to fall.' He scratched his chin. 'All the same, I think I'd better shift the horses and cows.'

'Why?'

'Just in case.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow.'

'I'll come too,' Mary said. 'I can help with the droving.'

'No, you'd better stay here with your mother.' Mary didn't know that the next day was going to be the most important day of her life.