

A Town Like Alice Study Guide

A Town Like Alice by Nevil Shute

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Plot Summary

A Town Like Alice tells the story of a plucky young Englishwoman who becomes a legend in Malaya during World War II, inherits a fortune, marries her true love, and wisely uses her money to transform an Australian ghost town into a thriving community.

When Douglas Macfadden dies in Scotland, his lawyer, Noel Strachan, finds his sole-surviving heir, 27-year-old great-niece Jean Paget. She and her brother Donald work in Malaya before the war. She alone returns to England, where she lives the boring life of a secretary in a small leather factory. An uncle's inheritance saves her from this. It is held in trust until she is 35, but the elderly, widowed trustee can raise capital in an emergency. He quickly falls in love with her. After declaring her intention to return to Malaya and build a well for natives who kept her and fellow prisoners alive in the war, Paget details three years of forced marching around the peninsula. Only 15 of the 32 women and children with whom Paget starts out survive.

During the march, they meet two Australian POWs impressed to drive trucks for the Japanese. One of them, Joe Harman, barter stolen gasoline to obtain the drugs and soap the pitiful women need, and then steals some prized chickens belonging to the sadistic Japanese commander. In retribution, Harman is crucified, flogged, and left for dead. Paget and her companions, who are forced to watch, trudge on in horror and shock. Staid Strachan is shocked and inspired by the story but has qualms. Nevertheless, Paget sails to Malaya and builds not just a well but also a primitive community center as a thanks offering to the women. This brings Paget needed closure. Learning from the well diggers that Harman amazingly survives, Paget goes to Australia to find him. At the same time, however, Harman is in England, looking for Paget, whom he has just learned is not married, as he had feared. Harman locates Strachan, who is emotionally torn, and sends him back to Australia by steamship, without telling him Paget's whereabouts.

Conscience forces Strachan to inform Paget of the situation by airmail, and she remains in Australia, waiting. After visiting his hometown, Alice Springs, whose lifestyle she learns to admire, Paget goes outback to Willstown, a miserable little place in Queensland near Midhurst, the cattle station where Harman works. Familiar with fancy leather goods from her postwar job in London, Paget passes the time by making a pair of alligator shoes, which the local residents feel could make a viable local industry. She writes Strachan a long proposal and asks he release £5,000 pounds of her inheritance to finance it. Pack, the head of the leather goods company for which she had worked, vouches for the idea and volunteers to distribute Paget's shoes in Britain. He also dispatches an experienced supervisor to help with set-up and training, and Strachan releases the funds. She flies to Brisbane and checks into the Strand Hotel, where he always stays.

Their first meeting at the airport, drive to the hotel, and evening together are awkward, until she changes into the worn Malay sarong he knows her in, and something clicks. They vacation on a coral island and decide to marry, but Paget wants a year to adapt to



life in Willstown and get her businesses off the ground. Along with the shoe factory, intended to keep marriageable girls in town, she opens an ice cream parlor, where they can spend their wages. This is followed by other enterprises aimed at improving the quality of life in town. Paget makes a good start in transforming Willstown into "A Town Like Alice," and fits in even better after playing a key role in the life-or-death rescue of a neighbor. After Paget and Harman marry and begin their family, Strachan visits, sees all she has accomplished, and returns home to write the story of a woman who has made a difference, but whom he has met 40 years too late.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

James Macfadden dies in March 1905, leaving his money to son Douglas. In 1935, Douglas' brother-in-law, Arthur Paget, dies accidentally in Malaya and Douglas contacts his lawyers about changing his will to set up a trust for his widowed sister Jean and her minor children. The narrator, Noel H. Strachan, is the firm's senior partner and Douglas' solicitor. He joins an annual fishing trip with a visit to his client. Although only in his fifties, Douglas is infirm, living below his means and without close relatives. The widow is in England, supervising the education of Donald (born 1918) and Jean (1921). Douglas wants Donald to inherit the estate intact after his mother's death and allows provision for young Jean, should mother and brother predecease her, but not before age 25. Strachan as executor and trustee returns to London, drafts the will, sends it off for signature, and never sees Douglas Macfadden alive again.

Strachan loses touch with most of his clients when his wife of 27 years dies, also in 1935, he takes a flat in Buckingham Gate, and centers his life on his club. He spends the war as a Civil Defense Warden, runs the office almost single-handedly, and emerges in 1945 feeling old. In January 1948, he learns Douglas Macfadden has passed away, travels north, and learns Jean Macfadden Paget dies of pneumonia in 1942. After the funeral, he returns to London with papers and within a week determines that Donald dies as a POW and Jean is in London working for Pack and Levy Ltd., a handbag manufacturer. Strachan writes a formal letter to the heiress, stating the facts, and asking Paget to make an appointment.

Paget arrives punctually, presents abundant proof of her identity, but barely remembers her uncle. Strachan explains the conditions of the will: the estate is £53,000, which will gross £1,550 a year, leaving after taxes £900 to spend. Paget is stunned, having always worked and expected always to work. She has no other life or friends. Strachan advises not to hurry decisions or talk about the legacy until legal proof of her brother's death is obtained and other legal matters settled. Paget has lived off Ealing Common for three years since being repatriated, before which she spends three and a half years as a "sort of prisoner of war" in Malaya. Strachan takes her brother's information to inquire at the War Office, apologizes for her uncle's misogyny, and explains his duties as trustee. He has the power to realize capital for her in cases when they agree it will be to her advantage, intends to make the trust as painless as possible, and wants to help her through the transition. He suggests they meet in a week to discuss any questions that arise and invites her to dinner at his club. She accepts gladly. Strachan wonders how such a fresh young woman spends her weekends and why she is not married.

Strachan learns how POW deaths are certified, and visits Dr. Ferris, the doctor at Camp206 at the time of Donald's death. Fit and cheerful with a macabre sense of humor, Ferris vividly remembers the delicate, popular, and multi-lingual lieutenant and can write a death certificate. He suffers many maladies, including a huge, poisonous



tropical ulcer on his leg. One night, he simply dies. Conditions are grim in camp, but are relieved a bit by the beauty of Three Pagodas Pass. Strachan tries to spare Paget the details, but she knows that no one dies peacefully of cholera. She doubts she will continue her present job, wants to do something worthwhile, but lacks skills. She doubts she will marry, attend university, or travel. She knows nothing about the Arts, which Strachan finds a pity. Over the next few weeks, they attend many cultural events and several times Paget visits him for tea. She draws her first check in March and prudently does not quit her job. When a rainstorm ruins a Sunday jaunt, they sit before a fire, and Paget announces an odd, perhaps foolish idea for spending her money: return to Malaya and dig a well.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces the protagonist and the narrator, her solicitor. It explains how she has come to have a great deal of money. Later in the story, it becomes important to realize that the trust includes terms for granting blocks of money for useful projects and Jean Paget's initial interest in leather working. Strachan is clearly smitten with Paget, which becomes a factor. Above all, he lives by the motto, "never hurry." Paget's intention to return to Malaya leads into her full wartime story and the atrocities suggested by Dr. Ferris.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Paget asks to explain. Her life falls into three parts. First, come the pleasant school years with her mother and brother in Southampton; she remembers little of life with father in Malaya, but retains the language; her fondest memory is ice-skating twice a week, which sustains her in the jungles. Donald goes to Malaya in 1937, while Jean completes commercial college and works a year. Mother arranges a job for her, undeterred by talk of war. Unmarried European girls are in short supply in Kuala Lumpur, particularly secretaries fluent in Malay. Jean leaves in the winter of 1939, and for 18 months has a marvelous time, too good to be true.

When war comes, Jean feels safe, with 300 miles of mountains and jungle between Kuala Lumpur and the Japanese invasion force. When they are not deterred, married women and children are evacuated to Singapore. Paget and five office girls are told to report for passage home. She heads instead to Batu Tasik to see Bill and Eileen Holland, knowing Eileen is not up to handling three small children during an evacuation. Bill tries to replace the worn tires on their car but returns only with news of an 8 AM bus to Singapore. Military curfew precludes leaving before dawn. The Japanese draw within 50 miles. They pack the car and set out, but it breaks down. They join refugee families on a military truck bound for Kuala Panong, where they sit under a verandah waiting for evacuation. Paget and Bill buy supplies, including a large canvas haversack that Paget carries for the next three years. Towards sunset, a large, seagoing Customs launch approaches, but discharges armed Japanese soldiers who spread out, confiscating pens, wristwatches, and rings, but do otherwise molesting no one.

After nightfall, young Capt. Yoniata inspects the prisoners and lectures about obeying orders and doing "good things." Without beds, mosquito nets, or food, the refugees spend a miserable night. After thin fish soup and dirty rice, the seven men depart, leaving 13 adults and 19 children under 14- 32 in all - behind. Horsefall, a former schoolmistress, assumes the role of group leader after protesting conditions too rudely, being slapped, but undaunted demanding - and getting - a regular supply of water. The prisoners accommodate to the hardships. Food just suffices for survival, complaints are punished, and without medical attention or drugs, the children get dysentery. Paget helps Eileen with the children. On the 35th day, 8-year-old Esmé Harrison dies and is buried in the Muslim cemetery. Children begin suffering nightmares about death.

After six weeks, Yoniata announces Malaya is liberated, apologizes for the discomforts, and promises happiness in Singapore, to which they must walk, 47 miles, in stages, with help from their four guards. They may take whatever they can carry. The first stop is Ayer Penchis, 12-15 miles away. The Japanese are as humane and helpful as orders allow, and carry children. Paget abandons fashionable but painful shoes and walks barefoot. They arrive at 6 PM and are put up in an empty barn used for curing raw rubber. Fatigued, they drink tea but few eat. Paget gets permission to visit the village,



where she buys a dozen mangoes. The women pool their money and send her back for more, which they share with the kind soldiers.

At the end of the next ten-mile leg to Asahan, Collard, a heavy 45-year-old, dies and, using hand signs, Paget and Horsefall warn the sergeant that walking every day will kill more. Women under 30 and the children grow fitter, while those older become listless. Yoniata turns up and abuses the sergeant for not marching. However, learning of Collard's death and seeing two more women in mortal danger, Yoniata promises to find a truck. Hopes are dashed and they never see Yoniata again. Moving on to Bakri, 11 miles away, Eileen weakens, and Paget carries baby Robin. The sergeant keeps his word about a day of rest. Paget negotiates with the village headman for rice and shelter, and apologizes for the intrusion. He is sorry to see the women in this state, shows contempt for the "Short Ones," and quotes the Fourth Surah about showing kindness towards women. They rest all day and then march to Klang, carrying the injured Ben Collard on a litter. They are put up in an empty schoolhouse. English-speaking Maj. Nemu arrives and is astonished Yoniata has dared send the prisoners. He has a doctor examine them for infectious diseases, and promises to hospitalize Ben, who is evacuated, but dies in the hospital.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 begins Paget's harrowing tale, describing her childhood and the reasons she and her brother journey to Malaya. The British evacuation is orderly for the rich and chaotic for the poor. For the longest time, they choose not to believe the Japanese will arrive. They use the pejoratives "Japs" and "Nips," and the Malays disparage the "short ones," but Japanese enlisted men and non-commissioned officers are depicted as humane. Officers are more brutal and disorganized. Creative communication across language barriers is shown charmingly. Shute interrupts the story to have Paget in the present day, staring into Strachan's fireplace, opine that ex-POWs who write books about conditions in the camps do not know what it is like not being in a camp.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

After providing 11 days of bad and insufficient food, Nemu orders the women on their way. It is the middle of March 1942. Horsefall comes down with malaria, never fully recovers her strength, and cedes leadership to Paget. There is no ship in Port Dickson. Paget sells a brooch to buy a cheap sarong, the lightest and coolest of tropical garments. The others disapprove of her "going native," but soon follow suit. They spend ten days before being expelled as a nuisance. En route, at Siliau, young Jane Holland dies. Eileen says it is "God's will," and holds off weeping until she is alone in the darkness. Baby Robin thrives, riding on Paget's hip. Seremban lies on the railway, but trains are irregular. There Ellen Forbes disappears, probably a victim of the Japanese soldiers with whom she is too friendly. The prisoners nearly starve in Tampin before being sent to Malacca, where they find no ship. Judy Thomson dies in Alor Gajah. They decide to walk to Singapore. In the middle of May, at Ayer Kuning, Horsefall dies, and Mrs. Frith takes charge of her son Johnny. This does Frith a world of good and ends her chronic complaining. In Gemas, Capt. Nisui informs them of strict orders against new prisoners going to Singapore. When Frith suggests they settle in a village for the duration, Paget objects that they depend on the "Nips" for food, but the idea is planted in her brain.

Nisui feeds the prisoners well before sending them to Kuantan, on the east coast, said to have a good woman's camp. From Gemas to Huantan is 170 miles without direct roads. They leave at the end of May, and march for a week before fever spreads among the children. Four children die at Bahau. Paget by now can tell when someone has given up on life. Survivors no longer grieve what has become a part of everyday life. They do what has to be done to bury the remains. Paget tries to engage Eileen with Robin, but she is too weak and sees that the baby prefers Paget. They set off with the children taking turns riding. Frith, who has lived 15 years in Malaya, says Kuantan is healthier and the people friendlier. Paget turns to her for comfort and advice. At Ayr Kring, Eileen Holland wears out. She hopes Bill will remarry and thinks it luck the baby takes to Paget. She is buried in the Muslim cemetery. The band is in the unhealthiest part of Malaya, full of swamps infested with snakes, crocodiles, and mosquitoes. Two days into their 40-mile passage, several, including Paget, spike dengue fevers. They march daily to get through, stumbling, and feverish. The headman in Mentri provides a hot infusion that tastes of quinine and seems to help. In eleven days, they reach higher ground at Temerloh. Villagers give them fresh fruit and more bark infusion and after six days of rest, they are ready to proceed.

In four days, they reach Maran, where a tarmac road begins. It is a joy after five weeks in the jungle. They come upon two heavy trucks surrounded by arguing Japanese guards. One truck is jacked up and two white men are working under it. One yells for the "mucking women" to get out of their light. Frith tells him to watch his mouth. Amazed to hear English, they roll out and stare. Fair-haired, powerfully built, and speaking slowly



with a drawl, Sgt. Joe Harman declares he and partner Ben Leggat are "Aussies" hauling railway lines and sleepers up and down the coast. Frith and Paget explain how they stop in villages, eat what they find, and, if they get sick, either get well or die, without doctors or medicine. They need Glauber's salts, quinine, and something for skin rashes, which Harman promises to find. Now that their numbers are down, Paget more easily arranges use of the school and some rice. Underneath the truck, the Aussies discuss plan on disabling it in order to spend the night here. Harman sneaks off to barter petrol (gasoline) for the items on Paget's list. Around 10 PM, he takes it over and they talk, Paget sitting on the step and Harman squatting in a peculiar, native fashion.

Harman tells of being a "ringer" (stock rider) at Wollara Station in Queensland, 110 miles southwest of Alice Spring, at the center of Australia, between Darwin and Adelaide. Alice is a "bonza" (great) place with plenty of water, which can be found all over the outback, if one knows how to look. Wollara is a cattle station 2,700 square miles supporting 18,000 head, easily run by Tommy Duveen and thirteen ringers, although the nine "boongs" (Aborigines) have a nasty habit of going "walkabout," wandering for 2-3 months in the outback, covering 400-500 miles until they have enough, and then returning to work. Some 3,000 "brumbies" (horses) ruin the cattle's food. The homestead stands at the center of the station, 60 miles from the Kernot Range, a weeklong trip on packhorses, or a day and a half by utility vehicle. They talk for over an hour and finally exchange names. Harman apologizes for calling her "Mrs. Boong" and promises to obtain whatever supplies they need. Soap is now her highest priority. The guards refuse to take on passengers, lest the overloaded vehicles break down and they face a flogging. Harman dribbles petrol from a loosened pipe as an excuse for running dry on the road

The women rest that day and then start walking the 55 miles to Kuantan. Paget watches in vain for Harman's truck. Walking is easier on tarmac, as the medicines take effect, the land grows healthier, and contact with the Aussies raises morale. When a Malay girl delivers six cakes of Lifebuoy soap with a note from Harman, the women are ecstatic. Paget guesses that he steals it or something else to trade for it. The women march next to Berkapor along a tree-shaded road, and trade for coconuts. They see the familiar trucks. Harman promises a portion of a pig they have killed, after the Japanese eat their fill. He returns later with 35 pounds worth, which they stew with their rice ration and eat until replete. Leftovers will last several days. Most of the women are wives of employees interned in Singapore. Frith and Paget both agree with Harman's view that the women ought to settle down somewhere. The problem is how to earn their keep. Harman promises a chicken or two, declines payment, and says jauntily the "ladies need feeding up." Paget asks him not to take risks, but he responds that prisoners must take what they can get.

Paget feels a bond growing and likes having leg pulled about her native dress and ways. She asks about the heat in his part of Australia. Harman says it can go up to 118° at Wollara, but it is dry, making one thirsty for a cold beer. The land around Alice is red beneath blue skies, and after the wet, everything turns green. Some people dislike Alice, but he finds it beautiful. In her sarong, holding the baby on her hip, Paget tells Harman about Southampton, to which she hopes to return, if she survives. She wants to



skate again at the ice rink. Harman explains they are driving next day, but promises to bring the chickens soon. She again asks him not to take risks. He assures her one can "run rings round these Nips when you learn how." He promises not to stick his neck out. He wants her to survive two years until the war ends.

After the rest day, the women head for Poho and see Harman and Leggat pass and wave. Paget is relieved when no chickens land at her feet, knowing these daredevils are still safe. That evening a Malay boy delivers five live black roosters in a sack. Certain they will attract the guards' attention, the women concoct a thin cover story and Paget offers one rooster to the sergeant. He is surprised they have such money, demands two roosters, but settles for one. That day in Kuantan, Capt. Sugamo, the local commander, awakens to learn five imported Black Leghorn fowls are missing along with a green mail sack. Military Police suspect the Australian drivers, known opportunists, but fail to turn up evidence. Sugamo grows angrier, seeing an insult to the Imperial Army, and dispatches MPs to the Jerantut route. They arrest a group of women and children guarded by a sergeant who holds a green sack. Paget sticks by her story through two hours of questioning, slapping, kicking, and stomping. The green bag is proof of the lie. Harman admits the theft to spare Paget additional torture.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 continues the horrific march, watching some characters die off and the survivors harden. It introduces a pair of crafty Australian POWs, setting up the second portion of the novel. A new kind of linguistic confusion is introduced, as the British cannot understand idiomatic words and phrases, only some of which are clarified in context. Note that "bonzer" means "great," "chunda" means "vomit," "crook" means "substandard," and "dinkie die" means "the whole truth."

Paget learns from the talkative Joe Harman a great deal about central Australia, which comes in handy later in the novel. Her insistence that Harman avoid excessive risk on their behalf makes a bad outcome of the chicken procurement plan inevitable. The irony is that a distinctive green bag is what gets them caught. Harman gallantly takes the blame to spare Paget, who suffers the first true brutality depicted in the book. Returning to Strachan's sitting room, Shute has Paget state bluntly that the Japanese nail Harman's hands to a tree and beat him to death before their eyes.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Strachan expresses pity, but Paget says such things happen in war, it is nearly forgotten, and continues narrating: The execution takes place beside the recreation ground. When the maimed body stops twitching, Sugamo tells the women they are bad and sends them walking to Kota Bharu. They are desperate to escape this place of horrors, escorted only by the disgraced sergeant who shares the chickens. Their first stop is Besaroh, a beautiful fishing village. Yet, when the children have nightmares about Harman, they skip their rest day to get further away. In the next beautiful village of Balok, they rest. The northeast coast of Malaya is fresh and lovely. Fish protein helps strengthen them and salt water heals some skin diseases. The children have energy to play. The sergeant, however, grows suspicious, unhelpful, moping, sullen, and lonesome. Paget tries to cheer him up, with little success. Warner, an elementary school mistress, teaches classes every free day. They experience little sickness and no more deaths.

Devout Frith decides Harman is a second Christ, healing their diseases and crucified to spare them death. The others long for God's help, and as memories of the Aussie fade, also adopt this "awed and roseate" view of Harman. Through him, they will again see homes, husbands, and western way of life. Paget does not dispel their fancies, but remembers Harman differently. She knows things might have developed between them fast, had he not believed her married with baby Robin on her hip. She grieves more deeply than the others but knows he is not divine.

At the end of August, they reach Kuala Telang, which consists of a square surrounded by native shops and an empty godown (warehouse) for rice, which becomes the prisoners' home. When the sergeant comes down with malaria, the women at first are maliciously pleased, but then recall his help, and nurse him. Paget meets with headman Mat Amin bin Taib, to report the situation and ask for food and lodging. She tells him they no longer require the luxuries of white "mems," but live like Malay women. Mat Amin finds this strange, but agrees. They make the sergeant as comfortable as possible, but it is clear he has given up on life. Paget finds a picture of a woman and four children, which he motions away and weeps. Paget wipes the tears and perspiration from his face. Two days later, he dies and is buried in the Muslim cemetery. Most of the women mourn their "old and valued friend."

The sergeant's death makes the women prisoners without a guard. Frith favors staying in this pleasant place, but objects that if the Japanese find out, they will punish the headman for not informing them, and the village cannot feed 17 people without reimbursement. Frith suggests growing their own food; half the fields are unplanted. Paget resolves to offer their labor in the fields in exchange for a place to live. Frith believes the Japanese will agree to have them doing something useful. Next morning, Paget presents the plan to the headman, who confirms labor is short, with male villagers



constructing Japanese airfields; rice will be in short supply next year. Over coffee, Mat Amin hears the harrowing tale, which looks likely to end in death. He recites about the inevitability of death, to which she counters verses about kindness towards women. She quickly admits hearing this from another headman. She proposes the women work every day in the rice fields for two weeks, after which she will report to the Japanese what they are doing and Mat Amin will attest they are growing extra rice for the Japanese. When the English Tuans win the war and return, this will be to the village's advantage. They agree.

Seven gritty, robust, determined women start work next morning, instructed by Fatimah binti Darus and Raihana binti Hassan, weeding fields, while the children play in the shade. They adjust to days in ankle-deep mud and try to outdo the Malay women. Rice is grown in fields that can alternately be flooded and dried out to help the crop grow properly. After the harvest, water buffalo eat leftover straw and fertilize the ground, preparing it for the next cycle. On the 16th day, Paget and Mat Amin set out for Kuala Rakit, 27 miles away. Tungku Bentara Raja, an official in the Malay administration, is touched by Paget's story and sympathetic to her plan, and agrees to present it to the Japanese Civil Administrator. Ultimately, it is an Army decision, and Col. Matisaka, who wants to be rid of this nuisance, lets the women stay.

Paget tells Strachan they spend three wasted years there, but he says not to judge until the end of her life. She recalls the Malays' kindness, and wants to repay it. She calculates that for under £50 she can spare the women two round trips a day to a spring a mile away to fetch gourds of drinking water. The water table cannot be deeper than 10-15 feet. Paget will be able to enjoy her money with a clear conscience. When Strachan asks why Paget had not stayed in Malaya after the war, she says she had had enough in 1945. They are trucked to Kota Bharu and flown to Singapore, where she meets Bill Holland and breaks the news. Bill wants to marry her, since 4-year-old Robin treats her as his mother, but she cannot be the kind of wife Bill wants. She lands at Liverpool, visits Aunt Agatha, learns of her mother's death (she already knows about Donald), and finds a job in London that has nothing to do with sickness and death. She gives no thought to rich Uncle Douglas, whom she meets only once as a child.

Paget has booked passage on a cargo ship for the end of May and will work until then. She has saved £60. From Singapore, she flies to Kota Bharu and from there will figure out how to get to Kuala Telang. It would be shorter flying to Kuantan, but she cannot bear to return. Paget and Strachan go on with their lives. At the club, he summarizes to a man named Wright, an ex-POW in Malaya, an anonymous client's story. Wright knows it well and has often wondered what happened to this extraordinary woman who saves so many lives. Paget saddens her boss by quitting, but he understands. Strachan arranges for her checks to be deposited in Singapore. A week before her departure, he reminds her of his broad discretionary powers to raise money for her in an emergency. When he asks her not to stay away too long, she says nothing holds her in Malaya once she has accomplished her task. Strachan stores Paget's belongings and accompanies her to the docks. He has filled her cabin with flowers. She kisses him on the lips to thank him for everything and, flustered, he says he will collect another when she returns. She is the daughter he has never had. Paget writes from most of the ports of



calls and he shares the letters with Wright, who arranges with the British Adviser, Wilson-Hays, to look after her. Wilson-Hays informs Mat Amin and arranges a jeep and driver. Wilson-Hays tells her how the women's exploits have raised British prestige. Paget stays at the Residency two nights and buys native items for the trip. Wilson-Hays thinks it wise not to go dressed like an Englishwoman, but other Brits disagree.

The rough 100-mile drive to Kuala Telang takes 14 hours and they arrive after dark. The village buzzes with excitement as Paget emerges, greets Mat Amin, and announces in Malay that the "white mems" have not forgotten them, once their need is past. Fatimah pushes through the crowd with her two children. Paget recognizes many friends, now grown, but there are many strangers, returned from impressment after her departure. When Fatimah introduces Derahman bin Ismail, her husband, Paget covers her face and apologizes for lacking a veil. Fatimah happily leads "Djeen" to her husband's house, where, after a traditional supper, she sleeps on the ground, a bit uncomfortably, for the first time in years. She is happy.

Next morning, Paget discusses plans with Fatimah, Meriam, and old Zubeidah, behind the house, out of the men's way. Paget has always earned her own living, but now with inherited money, works only if she wishes. She wants to use her money to repay the kindness she was shown while a prisoner, as a thank-offering to the women of Kuala Telang "that has nothing to do with the men." She wants to hire diggers, masons, and carpenters to create a stone well and washhouse where women can work face-to-face and talk, surrounded by a wall to screen them from the men's view. Some women doubt the men will allow it; others find it impious to abandon their mothers' and grandmothers' ways. Most are excited and discuss every detail. Paget is satisfied this will fill a real need and the women want nothing more than this.

That evening, Paget sits with Mat Amin on his veranda, sipping coffee. His wife has been talking about her plan all day. Paget explains feeling sorry for women having to go so far to fetch water; a well will give them more energy to serve the men faithfully and kindly, and may prevent miscarriages like Raihana binti Ismail. Paget reminds him of the verse about God favoring men who are kind to women. He agrees to talk it over with his brothers. Next morning, the men hold a conference and summon Paget. She explains the convenience her plan will bring and suggests locating it in front of Chai San's shop. They walk to the spot and consider the angles. The women watch the proceedings and are amazed to see Djeen talking almost as an equal. Knowing how slowly and cautiously Malay men proceed, Paget does not pressure them. Two days later, they grant permission, Mat Amin writes the Imam in Kuantan requesting skilled diggers, and Paget orders cement.

Paget spends three weeks of idleness playing with the children, working in the rice fields, and considering her future. Workers and supplies arrive at simultaneously and work begins by gray-bearded Suleiman and his sons Yacob and Hussein. Suleiman carries stories up and down the coast. Paget asks if he remembers Sugamo and is surprised that he does not know he has been hanged for war crimes. Suleiman is glad to hear it and informs his sons, who are working below ground. Suleiman declares Sugamo an evil man, a torturer. Paget admits to witnessing one such event, the



crucifixion of a prisoner. Hussein remembers it well: he is an Australian caught stealing chickens. Sugamo has him un-nailed to a tree, but he ends up in hospital and lives.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 takes up the saga after Harman's crucifixion, including his beatification by the devout Frith and other women. Paget's reaction shows the sexual electricity latent beneath their conversations, which had not fully come out in Chapter 3. The sergeant's poignant death sets the women up for spending the duration of the war in Kuala Telang. Mat Amin bin Taib, village the headman, sees Paget as clever, behaving properly by Muslim standards. Despite her youth, she knows how to manipulate him and the Japanese into agreeing to her plan: her group no longer requires the luxuries of white "mems," the village will deliver extra rice to the Japanese, the victorious English Tuans will reward the village.

Paget's wartime wisdom continues as she plans a return trip to Asia and building not just a well but also an autonomous women's area. Note that women's liberation is hardly fashionable in Europe in 1948. Paget remains famous in Malaya and among POWs in England. Strachan is shown repressing his feelings toward Paget, including viewing her as the daughter he has never had. He admits to sad premonitions she will not return to England. The chapter ends with the shocking news Harman has survived.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

In Kuantan, on the evening of that fateful July 1942 day, a sergeant reports to Sugamo that the Australian is still alive. Sugamo goes to check and asks the man if he can get him anything before he dies. Harman asks for a chicken and a beer. Expressionless, Sugamo returns to his house and sends an orderly to canvas the town for beer, knowing there is none. When it proves impossible for him to fulfill the dying wish in full - and thus show Bushido - he orders Harman taken down gently and sent to the hospital.

Learning Harman is alive is like opening a door or emerging from a tunnel. Paget tries to pray, but cannot form the words. The diggers can provide no more information than that Harman leaves the hospital on two sticks and is shipped to Singapore. Paget remains in Kuala Telang until work is completed and an opening ceremony held, during which she washes her sarong, causing the women to laugh and the men to wonder if this is such a good idea. She sends word to Wilson-Hays that she is ready to return and, during the two days it takes a jeep to arrive, says her difficult goodbyes. That night in bed in the Residency, she remembers what Harman has told her about Alice Springs. Wilson-Hays is sure women in other villages will want to copy what she has done in Kuala Telang. Paget shares what she has learned about Harman and asks how she can locate him. Wilson-Hays pessimistically suggests writing the Minister for the Army in Canberra, or Wollara, since she knows where Harman lives. He arranges for her to stay in Kuantan with David and Joyce Bowen, who will be disappointed not to put the famous woman up. She flies there next day. The pilot circles Kuala Telang so Paget can view the construction from the air. She sees her friends looking up, and then heads on down the coast.

The Bowens meet Paget at the airstrip and take her to the hospital, where they doubt anyone remains on staff since 1942. An ex-nurse, Phyllis Williams, who has married a Chinese man, Bun Tai Lin, may remember something, so they drive to her house. Williams remembers the "poor boy" whom she nurses for 3-4 months and is surprised survives. He is sent to Singapore as soon as he is fit to travel. Williams recalls him mentioning "Mrs. Boon." Paget laughs. They pass the recreation ground and watch Malay women gossiping beneath the fateful tree. Paget flies to Singapore, whence she writes an 8-page letter to Strachan, puzzling over how to get in touch with Harman and announcing she is flying to Darwin. She has £170 remaining, plus her next month's check, and can be reached care of the Bank of New South Wales in Alice Springs. Apologizing for being a nuisance, she hopes to be home by Christmas with much to tell him. Reading and re-reading the letter, Strachan is bitterly disappointed, and in a black mood goes to his club to read Horace and divert his mind. The passage only reminds him of Paget and, abandoning "morbid fancies," he returns the tome to the shelf.

A week later, Strachan's clerk announces a pleasant Australian named Harman come without appointment and wants to see him. As he waits, Strachan wonders how the



stock rider has found him - and how much he dares divulge about a client. Harman is blue-eyed, too square-faced to be handsome, thickset, and walks with a "curious, stiff gait." Strachan cannot resist the temptation to look at his horribly scarred hands. When the uncomfortable visitor asks about Paget, Strachan reminds him client information is confidential. Harman talks about meeting in Malaya during the war and describes his life since the war. Strachan notes he now works at Midhurst Station, Willstown. He has come on holiday, knowing no one, hoping to find Paget. The trip is possible thanks to "The Golden Casket," the Queensland State lottery that raises money for hospitals. The payoff is AU£1,000. Everyone plays it, because even if one loses, the hospitals it builds are useful. The one in Willstown has three wards, a visiting doctor, and a wireless to contact the Cairns Ambulance to fly the sick to it, some 300 miles from Willstown.

Harman tells how he has come to visit Strachan. In Malaya, Paget says she lives in Southampton, so when he arrives, he checks the phone book without success. She also mentions an aunt in Colwyn Bay, North Wales, so he tries there. She is suspicious and gives only the trustee's address. He has been in England five days, spending extra to fly because he cannot be away from the station too long. He explains how it is slack time in the stock business in Gulf Country, but will pick up again towards Christmas. Strachan tells him that by bad luck, Paget is abroad in the East. The best he can do is forward a letter for him. Harman brightens, amazed to come 12,000 miles to find Paget "gone walkabout." Strachan suggests that Harman write whatever he wants and bring it back next day to be sent off with a cover note. If Paget wants to get in touch with him, she will. Strachan observes that Paget has recently come into money, so they must worry about "touts" (scalpers). Harman had thought she is a typist. He departs to the Kingsway Palace Hotel, and Strachan worries most of the night about having done the right thing. He plans on finding out why, after six years, Harman is suddenly anxious to resume contact.

Harman does not appear for their noontime appointment, and Strachan throughout the afternoon and evening checks with his hotel. Next day, he sends Harris to check the police courts. Harris finds Harman in the Bow Street lock-up for "drunk and disorderly." Strachan tells him to bail the drunk out and bring him to his flat, where he has the charwoman (maid) make up the spare room and lay in provisions. He suggests the Australian bathe and shave, change clothes, have breakfast, and tell him where he stands. Harris says Harman has lost £70, but he has a letter of credit to tide him over. After breakfast, Harman decides against writing a letter, even though Strachan says it is the best course. He is certain Paget will be unhappy in backward Willstown. He explains that shortly before he comes to England, he meets an ex-POW pilot in Julia Creek, who informs him Paget is not as he believes married. The baby misleads him. Harman had left the bar, thought things over, and flown to England to find the "bonza" girl he wants to marry. He explains, awkwardly, that he had won the Casket in 1946, and saved it for a future eventuality. Strachan cannot help feeling sorry for this gambler who ironically is being search for him in Australia. Strachan is not prepared yet to reveal this, and asks why he does not want to write her.

Harman confesses he would not mind marrying money, but has no "high-falutin" ideas. He is a competent stockman, capable of retiring with £50,000, but the outback is what



he is cut out for; big cities and towns make him nervous. Willstown has no radio station, grocery store, dress shop, ice cream place, bookstore, doctor, telephone, swimming pool, or women companions. Shopping in Cairns is an expensive flight or 4-day drive away. It is grand country for a man but a "crook place" for a woman. Most outback towns are the same. The only exception is Alice Springs, which has everything. There is pain in Harman's eyes as he talks about meeting Paget in Malaya when neither has anything. Learning she is not married, Harman rushes to England without considering Willstown's privations. Realizing it cannot work, he goes "on the grog."

Strachan finds that reasonable under the circumstances, but believes he still should write. Paget believes he is dead. This tips Harman off that Strachan knows about him. The attorney says Paget feels guilty for what has happened to him. Harman rejects the idea, but does not know what to write to her. Strachan urges him to think about it in the time he has left and suggests he conserve money by taking an £80 steamer home. He offers to put him up for two weeks and arrange entertainments, including a visit to his father's hometown, participating in his favorite shortwave broadcast, "Much binding in the Marsh," and seeing thoroughbred horses and cattle. Working that afternoon, Strachan believes Paget may well marry this man of marked virtues, who is likely to be a good husband. Still, he wants to investigate her Australian background through grandfather James Macfadden. He asks for the client file. Perhaps he is another Harman.

James Macfadden's will of 18 Sep. 1903 says he is of County of Yorkshire and Hall's Creek, Western Australia. He calls Marcus Fernie at the BBC and arranges Harman's appearance on the program, and Sir Dennis Frampton for a visit to his place in Taunton. That night, Harman reports his father's birthplace ghastly; he sees why he emigrates in 1904 at age 15 to Queensland. Later, he fights at Gallipoli, dies in 1940, leaving mother alive at Curry. Harman has never visited Hall's Creek, but knows it is an old gold mine, like many in Gulf Country that strike and die, including Willstown. He has never heard of any Macfaddens. Harman goes on to do well on the radio program and thoroughly enjoys the Frampton farm. Strachan promises to inform Paget about Harman's visit by airmail, so he can expect an answer. As he sees Harman off at the docks, he cannot bring himself to admit he holds a letter from postmarked Willstown.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 begins by examining how Harman survives his crucifixion. Bushido is introduced by the comment that Westerners can never fully understand the Japanese mindset. Bushido is a code of moral principles that guides elite Samurai warriors since the Middle Ages. Because he cannot keep his promise to the dying man completely, Sugamo cannot let him die. Samurai - and by extension, Japanese Imperial Army officers - can die honorably only by the sword. Those who fail to die on the battlefield must commit "seppuku" ("hara-kiri"). Sugamo's hanging by the Allies is meant to dishonor him. Harman's death wish is delicious braggadocio, sharply defining his personality. It contrasts with his shyness in Strachan's presence, later in the chapter.



Chapter 5 also shows Strachan coming to grips with his feelings for Paget. The quote from Horace's Odes (1.22), about his mistress, Lalage, sweetly laughing and prattling, seems not to fit Paget, but it touches the old man's heart. When Strachan and Harman meet, the lawyer is torn between helping the lovers get together and his own emotions. In the end, he compromises in a way that allows Paget time to wander the Australian outback, as is seen in the next chapter.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Paget is "wildly and unreasonably happy," reaching the Darwin airport, feeling finally recovered from the war and no longer 70 years old. Reporters surround the gangway, looking for celebrity stories, but are disappointed. Stuart Hopkinson of the Sydney Monitor offers Paget a lift to the Darwin Hotel. She invents a cover story in which Harman is a second cousin she is looking up for her worried uncle. Hopkinson and Hal Porter of the Adelaide Herald prove helpful over the next few days, showing her the sights, explaining local customs, and suggesting the best way to reach the outback. They paint a gloomy economic picture of the region. There are abandoned businesses and a railway line, a beautiful but undeveloped port, and severe "outbackitis." Remembering Harman's recollections of Alice Springs, Paget asks about it. Hopkinson says it is "all right," because it is a railhead and has a "go-ahead" attitude.

Paget boards a big streamlined bus, comfortable but not air-conditioned, which cruises along at 50 mph through stunted eucalyptus woods separated by empty meadowlands. A fellow traveler says the area is useless for farming. After Katherine, where they stop for lunch, the land grows more arid. They spend the night in Daly Waters, which consists of a hotel, post office, and airport. For the first time, Paget sees ringers dressed in jodhpurs and elastic-sided boots, playing cards on the ground, squatting Harman-style. She suppresses an absurd temptation to ask if they know him. Next day, as the bus moves southwards toward Tennant Creek, the country turns hotter and drier to become a pure sand desert. At dusk, they reach Alice Springs and stop before the bungalow-style Talbot Arms Hotel. Paget changes clothes and strolls the broad roads, feeling instantly at home in this strangely English place. The main street is, as Harman says, full of the amenities a young woman could want, including ice cream sodas, to which she treats herself.

In the morning, Paget asks the hotel manager, Mrs. Driver, how to contact her second cousin, who supposedly lives here. Driver recognizes Harman's name, says he used to work at Wollara, but stays there only six months after being crucified in the war (Paget feigns surprise and horror), and disappears. Art Foster overhears and volunteers that Harman has returned to his native Queensbury; he is sure Duveen will know the address. Paget asks innocently if Harman's family accompanies him, and learns he is not married. There is no telephone in Wollara, but every morning and evening the radio network operator passes gossip among 50 stations. Taylor at the hospital will transmit Paget's message. Heading back to the milk bar for another ice cream soda, Paget meets 18-year old Rose Sawyer, who works in the dress shop and Alice is not as terrible as she had expected before moving here. She provides history: in 1928, Alice has three houses and a pub, but then the railway arrives; in 1930, the flying doctor service begins; in 1939, there are 300 people; Alice becomes a military staging point and in 1945 reaches 750. Currently it has 1,200 and is growing with new houses and shops going up. Sawyer invites Paget to a swimming party at the Macleans, where



Paget satisfies everyone's curiosity about England, the "home" none has seen but cherishes. That night, she contemplates her next step. Clearly, Harman has recovered and, amazingly, can still work in the outback. There is no compelling reason for her to find him, but she cannot leave Australia without seeing him. She falls asleep smiling.

In the morning, Paget learns that Harman is manager of Midhurst Station near Willstown. Taylor shows it to her on a map at the mouth of the Gilbert River on the Gulf of Carpentaria. It has an airstrip, hotel, and little else. Paget enjoys a soda, buys a map, bus schedule, and airline timetable, and has another soda, likely her last for a long time. Sawyer joins her, advises catching a Maclean flight to Cloncurry on Monday, and invites her to stay with her family until then. After collecting her suitcase, Paget laboriously composes a telegram to Harman announcing she is coming to him. On the third day of talking about England to the Sawyers, Paget confesses the truth about Malaya. They agree not to let it reach the papers. When Rose compares her boyfriend to Harman, who lets himself be crucified, Paget denies she is in love. She departs Alice Springs on Monday, with regret all around.

Monday, Paget zigzags across the wastes of Central Australia in a Dragonfly, on a mail and passenger run. They land 8-10 times for tea and gossip. Paget gets a good idea of what life in the stations is like. Cloncurry is an extensive town on the east-west railroad, "redolent of cattle," with streets wide enough to drive them through to stockyards. She hears for the first time the slow, deliberate Queenslander speech that reminds her of Harman. She stays in the Post Office Hotel. She walks the whole town and takes a nap until teatime, which she is shocked to find consists of an enormous roast and plum pudding. She goes to bed at 8 PM. At dawn, she boards a vintage Dragon for another day of meandering deliveries, ending at Willstown. The countryside is wooded with gum trees. The deep river flows into the sea three miles below town; all other watercourses appear dry. The town consists of 30 buildings, widely scattered on unpaved streets. Only the hotel is two-storied. The airport is military-quality.

The plane is met for refueling by Al Burns, the Shell Oil agent and resident gossip. He says Harman is in England on holiday, due back late-October. Paget blinks and wants to laugh at the irony. The pilot offers to take her back to Cloncurry, but this is the last place Paget wants to be. Burns recommends Cairns or Townsville over Willstown for 6-8 weeks, but transportation to either is inconvenient and expensive. The local hotel is cheap, so Paget opts to stay a week and try to see Jim Lemmon. The men warn her conditions are primitive but respectable. She expects to survive. A lorry picks her up and drives the noisy, swaying, bumpy way into town, with driver Sam Small shouting proudly about his English parents. He tells her about Harman winning the Casket, which is "Greek to her." He asks about rationing at home.

They pull up before the Australian Hotel, corrugated iron over wood frame, and Small introduces the determined, suspicious landlady, Mrs. Connor. Men sleep here, so it will not be comfortable for Paget, she is sure. Paget expects to survive a week in one of two back rooms, alongside the maid Annie. Asked if folks in England have enough to eat, Paget repeats her speech. The room is small but clean with good mosquito netting and good ventilation if the door is left ajar. Connor warns that the ringers will gather to look



her over. Paget says she meets Harman in Singapore awaiting passage home and is sorry to see he has "gone walkabout." When Connor remarks about her picking up "Aussie slang," she smiles. Dinner consists of roast beef, lamb, pork, or turkey, plus coffee or tea. Paget, who is seated separately from 3-4 male guests, finds the heaping plateful overwhelming and worries about the swarming flies. She eats a quarter and escapes outdoors to the verandah, knowing it is strict taboo in Australia for women to enter a bar. She studies the few buildings, Abo stock riders, and a steaming 8-foot geyser of water rising from a pipe. A quarter mile away, she sees a hut built across a stream but cannot figure out its purpose.

A "clean-looking young yokel" with the gait of a ringer approaches and asks if she has just flown in - and about rations in England. Pete Fletcher's family comes from England. He explains about the natural gas bore and offers to light it after dark. Burns joins them. They explain that cattle will drink the mineral water in the dry season only. Tim Whelan, a carpenter, joins them and explains that Willstown is once crowded with buildings and 8,000 people; Burns is sure it is 30,000. An old argument ensues, and then one about current figures. An immediate mental census yields 146 in town, excluding boongs, and Paget hears the name and occupation of every one of them. During the gold rush (1893-1905), there are 17 hotels in town. Cattle stations alone remain after the surface gold is taken; deep mining is too expensive. Paget pictures the town in its heyday and admires the visionary planner who lays it out. At nightfall, they light the proudly bore and Paget dutifully admires it. At 9 PM she excuses herself to sleep, but asks Burns if there is any likelihood of Lennon coming to town. If he does not come in for Saturday grog, Burns offers to run her out to his place, as a change of pace. The town generator is shut down when the bar closes at 10 PM. When Willstown sleeps, so does Paget.

Paget wakes a 5 AM and listens to people starting their day. Breakfast is a half-pound stake and two fried eggs - no exceptions. Afterwards, Paget asks if she may borrow a washtub and iron, and declines having Annie do it. It is a sweltering 120°F in the kitchen and Paget admires the women who prepare three hot meals a day there. Annie hangs around her, complaining of feeling poorly. During the morning, Paget meets several townspeople of note; she sleeps like everyone else until the day cools, and then sits on the verandah, drawing a circle of squatting ringers. She learns they are better paid than those who leave to join railway gangs, but there is nothing to do in town. Movies are rare; dances are lopsided, with only two unmarried girls for 50 men. Any normal girl escapes as soon as she is of age. That evening Edie Page and his beautiful, illiterate mixed-race wife arrive to buy supplies. Connor says Page marries her when he gets lonely. That night, Annie asks Paget how to abort a pregnancy; her father will thrash her when he learns. Paget is compassionate but not useful. She suggests marrying the father, but Annie has no idea which ringer it might be. At the hospital, they simply call her a "wicked girl." Paget lies in bed a long while, "beset by human suffering."

Paget spends the next two days on the verandah, talking to ringers, and visiting establishments: Miss Kenroy's school, Sister Douglas' hospital, Mr. Carter's pathetic public library housed in the Shire Hall, and Sgt. Haines' police station. Lemmon comes to town as predicted in Harman's outsized International utility. He says Harman is aboard ship, due in mid-October. He would invite Paget to stay in Midhurst, but there is



even less to do there than here. She asks him to contact her at the Strand Hotel in Cairns should more detailed information arrive. Later, on the verandah, Paget meets Jeff Popock, a bashful, bearded old man billed as the best alligator hunter in Queensland (82 last year). Burns is sure she has never seen an alligator skin in England. Paget laughs and explains her job there. The locals know shoes are made from their exports but have never seen one. Paget gets an idea: she will turn the beautifully soft skin into shoes.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 transitions to the next phase in Paget's life. From the moment she reaches Australia, she is "wildly and unreasonably happy," and no longer 70 years old. She gets on well with everyone she meets from reporters (whom she expects to be like the movies) to ringers, squatting Harman-style, and speaking in the same slow, deliberate manner. The chapter has two minor motifs: ice cream sundaes as a symbol of civilization and the Aussies' longing for Britain as "home," and concern about the food supply there. Having survived wartime Malaya, Paget has several times to assure the Aussies she can survive here. Learning Harman is in England on holiday, Paget sees the irony. She learns about the gold rush and current lack of opportunity, and is ready to make the best of the next month and a half until she gets the idea of making alligator shoes in Willstown, a place as desolate and uninviting as Alice Springs is pleasant.



Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary

Paget makes three pair of shoes in her room before she gets a pair she can wear. Tim Whelan measures her to make mulga wood "lasts"; Pete Fletcher provides tanned cow skin for soles and bull-skin for building up heels and shoots and skins, a wallaby, and tans its hide for lining. Burns and Don Duncan join the team and Willstown is enlivened for weeks. Paget's first pair reflects the fact that she has never done something she well understands from observing. They would work for someone who happens to have the right-shaped feet. She buys better equipment and supplies for the second attempt. Annie watches her with great interest and declares the results as good as those in the shops. They are better but still uneven, lumpy, and finger-marked with sweat. The third pair is "creditable" but ugly and stained. She shows all three to the men, who are amazed and impressed. Paget points out defects and explains the difficulties. They would cost £4 15 s. in England, while quality shoes go for upwards of £10. They are amazed.

Paget learns how to take a proper bath in Willstown. The little hut down the street contains a concrete pool filled with run-off from the bore. The warm saltwater is refreshing. As she lies in the bath, Paget thinks about how making shoes could solve the problem of what she will do with her money and the rest of her life. She knows business and selling shoes from Pack and Levy. She envisions a small workshop employing five girls, with a tannery outside, hand presses, rotary polisher, and air conditioning. She calculates the costs and believes it cheaper to make shoes here than in England. She knows that Pack sells other people's products and is not happy with manufacturing. Her biggest concern is training local girls to turn out quality work. That evening, Small approaches her on the verandah and asks if Paget could teach his 15-year-old daughter Judy to make shoes at home. Otherwise, Judy like all the other girls will run off to the city, leaving her mother desolate. Speaking half to herself, Paget points out how inferior her shoes are, even for sail in Cairns, and then tells him her dream of a serious factory in Willstown. She wonders how many girls 14 and up would work regularly for £5 a week (once skilled). Small believes 6-7 immediately, with more coming up. He estimates a 30 X 15-foot wooden hut would cost £200; adding a verandah and double roof would double that. He is sure anything that would keep the girls here after graduation would be popular.

Paget leaves next day for Cairns on an unhurried, two-day flight. Overnighting in Normanton, she learns the locals get shoes from a Manning Cooper factory nearby, where Elsie Peters is a supervisor. In Cairns, a prosperous town of some 2,000, which she likes instantly, Paget finds a letter waiting from Strachan and instantly replies. She intends to go into business. Willstown is a terrible place where no woman could be happy. She has learned in Malaya to do without creature comforts, but Willstown lacks even fresh fruit, vegetables, and milk. Were they to marry, she does not want Harman to change his lifestyle. Paget asks for £5,000 to start a tiny workshop making handbags



using local materials and labor. She is asking Pack to sell them in England and advise on setting up. Construction and outfitting should cost £1,000, but she also wants a shop that will sell fruit, vegetables, milk, sweets, makeup, and magazines to give workers something to spend their wages on and improve their lives. The total capital expenditure should be £2,500, so £5,000 will cover stocking and salaries. She is prepared to lose her money on this, and would want to do it even if Harman were not in the picture.

Receiving the letter five days later, Strachan red-pencils financials and gives it to Lester for comments. It represents 9% of her capital, but she is a responsible 27-year-old, and they have latitude to grant her request. Strachan phones Pack to arrange a meeting, to which Pack brings Paget's handmade alligator shoes. They are "bloody marvelous," considering her lack of experience and primitive tools, but "bloody awful" for the trade. Strachan is disappointed in the assessment, but rallies when Pack offers to send the disgruntled forewoman Aggie Topp to Australia for a year to train and supervise workers, provided Paget foot the transportation bill. A former A.T.S. sergeant during the war, stationed in Egypt, Topp is perfect for the task. They calculate the cost at £300, which seems cheap. Pack wants to see this work. Strachan writes Paget (and assumes Pack does also), but she is in Rockhampton, looking up Peters when the airmail letter arrives. Peters refuses to go to Gulf Country, and Paget flies back, depressed, rather than endure another sweltering, 700-mile train ride.

The letters and prospects of Topp's help revive Paget's spirits, but she refuses to decide anything until talking with Harman. For three weeks while living in the Strand Hotel, Paget cycles through feelings she is making a colossal fool of herself and needs to flee back to England, to appreciating Australian kindness, to knowing she cannot run away from things worth having that may never come to her again. She makes discreet inquiries into Harman's likely itinerary after docking in Brisbane. She decides to stay where she is at the Strand, which he normally frequents. She writes him care of the shipping line to tell him her plans and ask him not to talk about Malaya. A return telegram says he arrives on Thursday. Paget goes to the airport feeling like a 17-year-old on her first date. Harman pictures the girl who had looked like a Malay, carrying a baby on her hip, and fears he will not recognize her. Paget fears the same, but knows the stigmata will set him apart. She recognizes him stepping off the plane, walking stiffly - a clear mark of Kuantan, which pains her. When she yells his name, he stares at her and cannot see in this pretty girl in a summer frock, the tragic, bloodied figure he last sees. A characteristic turn of her head, however, convinces him this is Mrs. Boong. He greets her sheepishly.

In a taxi, they talk about Strachan, Harman's three weeks in England, her surprising trip to the East, and letter at Brisbane. They have much explaining to do once they settle in their rooms. Paget orders four bottles of beer sent to her room and arranges deck chairs in the shade. He says his back does not hurt much but he cannot lift heavy weights; the scared hands can grip properly. She tells of being sent of by Sugamo in the care of the dishonored sergeant, who dies at Kuala Telang, where, happily, they are allowed to settle, working the rice paddies. Harman admits to hearing a bit about her fate from the pilot who evacuates the women in 1945. They meet at Julia Creek, which is on his current route, and he tells Harman that Paget is single; that sends him off to England.



Paget describes the well project that brings her back to Malaya and learning of his survival, which brings her to Darwin, Alice, and Willstown in search of him. He cannot believe she has survived three weeks in Willstown.

During tea, Paget admits to seeing little of the countryside, not even the Great Barrier Reef. Harman suggests a weekend on Green Island. She calculates that a weekend in bathing suits will help them resolve matters better than in Cairns. He arranges passage with a friend and reluctantly accepts that they will go "dutch treat." They talk for hours about everything except Willstown, including his early life on various stations, relations, war service, and Midhurst. He is anxious to get back to see his dog Lily, who by now has a litter, and horses. Life in the outback is impossible without the companionship of dogs.

They board Ernie's fishing boat for a two-hour voyage to the round coral island. There are no other visitors, so they get the two open bedroom huts with privacy curtains. Paget wears a new two-piece bathing suit from which Harman cannot take his eyes. She tells him the tanning pattern comes from her sarong, which she will wear later. She sees the puckered scars on his back for the first time and feels terrible. He warns against going into the water too deep, for fear of sharks, to which she replies she prefers swimming pools and suggests Willstown could use one, fed from the bore. Careful she does not burn in the sun, Harman suggests they dress for lunch. When she asks why there is no fresh fruit in Willstown, he says labor is not available, outside of "bonza" Alice. They sleep through the heat of the day, swim again before tea, fish in the evening, and talk about England and her unsettled plans before bed. She grows weary at his proper manners and restraint. He has not tried to kiss or touch her. She grows restless and troubled; if something is not resolved by the time they leave the island, she will simply go home.

To force this issue, next day, Paget changes into Malay attire, hoping to become the Mrs. Boong Harman recalls. It works. He kisses and fondles her, and carries her to the bedroom hut. The sarong falls down and she hides her breasts. She asks him to wait until they are married, which is why she has come to Australia, of course. She hopes to wait a few months to arrange things, but if he cannot wait, she will marry him instantly. When they tier, they retire to their own rooms, and both sleep soundly. In the morning, Paget awakens at dawn and fetches coffee. After a swim, she brings it to Harman and watches him sleep. She refuses him a kiss until he bathes, showers, and dresses. Conversation is no longer awkward. Harman intends to leave Midhurst and work somewhere more fitting for a married woman, preferably in Queensland. Paget is sure he will be bored and blame her for ruining his life. They agree outback life is hard, but disagree on the solution, until she says she knows a way of changing Willstown.

The couple blends romance and planning. Paget believes Willstown can be developed like Alice because of the rain. Harman objects that most of it falls between December and February, runs off, and by March the land is as dry as ever. He wants to build barrages on the creeks, a few a year, starting at the head and working down, to create small pools every 2-3 miles. They will dry out in hot sun, but not before providing extra feed. Midhurst is 1,100 square miles, carries 9,000 head, but could support double that,



which would bring annual income to £12,000-£13,000, making an investment in dams worthwhile, Paget calculates. Harman doubts they could find and keep laborers. He, Lennon, and Dave Hope are the only white ringers; they would need three reliable men to work picks and shovels 40 miles from the homestead. The station could use 20 ringers for an 18,000-head herd. Paget muses that if all the other stations develop likewise, there would be good reason to build up the town and provide all the amenities for families. She tells him about Frith in Malaya believing him to be another Christ crucified; she would rethink it if she could hear his present nay saying.

Paget asks if Harman would think it stupid to start a business in Willstown. She tells him of her background in England, the practice shoes, Pack, and Topp. Harman says he sees a lot of alligator shoes and cases in London, all sold at high prices. He doubts, however, that 6-7 girls would remain in town to work; they would marry and leave. As they lie in the silvery water, Paget talks of her second dream: opening an ice cream parlor. He is sure it will never pay, but she says it will stock many things that women want and she has a pretty girl from Alice who wants to run it for her, Rose Sawyer. When Harman says Sawyer will draw ringers, she replies they will buy plenty of ice cream, particularly on Sundays, when the bars are closed. He figures it will cost £3,000-£4,000, and is amazed when she says she is worth £53,000 when she turns 35. Until then, she has to ask Strachan for money, which is good. She wants to use money the way it ought to be. Men will not stay in the Gulf Country because there are no girls; girls leave because there are no jobs. Midhurst will get its manpower if she provides female jobs. She recalls Page, lonely enough to marry an "illiterate, inarticulate lubra."

Paget does not want to make Harman wait, but wants to get the business moving before they marry, assuming she will soon afterwards be pregnant. Mustering begins after the wet season, followed by branding calves and driving stock to Julia Creek. They could marry in April and honeymoon in Julia Creek. Harman recommends farming out the messy job of tanning and dressing skins. He knows a man in Cairns to talk to. He also suggests expanding the workshop to include bedrooms for her, Sawyer, and Topp. It will be more comfortable than the hotel, and, when the business expands, they can knock out the walls. They nap separately during the heat of the day, and Paget is concerned he has seen her naked when he calls her for a swim. Paget wants to delay a formal engagement until just before the wedding, lest Harman be constantly defending his fiancée against rude comments about her crazy project. She asks about serving boongs and whites together. This happens in Duncan's store, but he doubts people would tolerate a white girl serving boongs. Paget is unwilling to lose their considerable business, and decides to have two parlors with freezers and kitchen between.

They kiss goodnight, knowing it will be impossible in Willstown. Harman suggests they return to Green Island before going to Julia Creek in April. They go ashore in the morning, check into the hotel, and visit Gordon at the tannery. He suggests using wallaby hide for lining; the quality is as good and their numbers need to be controlled. Harman arranges to send him some alligator skins for a "sample treatment." They shop and place orders all afternoon and book passage to Willstown on the morning plane. Before going to bed, Paget writes an 8-page letter to Strachan.



Strachan observes that Paget is a good writer (she continues to write him weekly). He receives this letter on a drizzly November morning and lets his breakfast grow cold reading it three times. Walking to the office and imagining Paget in warm Australia, Strachan is nearly run over by a taxi when he steps off a curb. Strachan is in a daze all day, working perfunctorily and mentioning Paget's news to everyone he sees. At the club, late night, he tells Wright, the former Malay policeman, about her. Wright asks if she will come home before the wedding. Strachan sighs that she has no reason, no ties. He and Wright do not speak for months after suggesting Strachan is in love with her himself. Impossible, he says for a 73-year-old, who could be her grandfather.

Chapters 7-8 Analysis

Chapter 7 shows Paget's first steps in the leatherworking industry that in the end makes Willstown livable. Everyone gets behind her. She makes what she thinks is a creditable product, concocts a business plan, and forwards it to Strachan and Pack. Despite reservations, they agree to back her. As in Malaya, where men also must approve the plans, Paget envisions something bigger: a shop where workers can spend their wages on and improve their lives. Paget next goes to the airport to meet Harman, feeling like a 17-year-old on her first date. Conversations are awkward and guarded until Harman suggests a weekend on Green Island. The first day there is no better, but when Paget recreates the Mrs. Boong look, Harman is released. The sexual interplay is delightful. She first wishes he would make a move, and then fends him off once they decide to marry. This intensifies in short Chapter 8, where the opening sentence talks deceptively about mixing economic planning with "love-making." Paget turns quite prudish and wants to delay marriage - and sex - a year. Note that Australia is officially segregated until 1973. In a touching chapter ending, Strachan is forced to confront his feelings for Paget, but denies the possibility.



Chapters 9-10

Chapters 9-10 Summary

Paget works harder in November and December than ever before. Strachan has Topp visit before leaving, assesses her as an excellent manager, gives her a ticket and itinerary, and discusses the job. He sends to Australia with her a large air-conditioning unit that Paget feels is essential to success but cannot obtain locally. By comparison, all the other things that Strachan arranges for her are minor. Harman arranges with Whelan and sons the ordering of lumber and planning on the shop and bedroom annex, with the ice cream parlor to come next. Whelan discusses leasing fees with the Shire Clerk. The men folk seal the contract in the bar while Paget drinks lemonade on the steps, careful of her proper reputation now. She next flies to Brisbane to order equipment, major appliances, furnishings, and other necessities, paying cash, and is back in Willstown in a week with arrangements in place for ice cream supplies. The framing is already up and the old men watch the strange English girl's "midsummer madness" in disbelief.

Harman fetches Paget to Midhurst during a Sunday lull, clearing town before kissing her. She studies the parched landscape on her first venture out of town: the sparse eucalyptus gum trees, earth pitted and potholed by traffic, tracks that converge on good water crossings and then fan out again. Harman tells her how cattle and horses graze and informs her that a kangaroo bounding away is a wallaby. He has a tame baby wallaby at home, adopted when they kill the mother to provide sample skins to Cairns. Three square miles around the house are fenced off as a paddock. The house is located on a low hill above a dry creek. It is a large wooden building set on posts, surrounded by a deep verandah, where Harman sleeps and does most of his living. The roof is, inevitably corrugated iron. There are three bedrooms and a sitting room, plus kitchen and bathroom annexes at opposite ends. The toilet is in a hut some distance away. Of the 5-6 excited dogs that meet them, only blue-and-yellow Lily interests him. The joey hops up fearlessly and nibbles at Paget's fingers. When grown, it will be capable of killing its canine playmates but will probably just wander away.

Fat, middle-aged Palmolive, Moonshine's "gin" (wife), sets the table and brings the inevitable steak, two eggs, and strong tea. The meat is too tough to cut. Palmolive alternates cooking with Mary, Bourneville's gin, who is better. Paget looks forward to cooking, but Harman wants her to concentrate on her own projects. He gives her a tour of the few remaining buildings, then offers to teach her to ride. She changes into riding clothes he has outgrown, which are outrageously large on her, and climbs into a strange saddle, arched front and back, with horns that clamp her thighs in place. As they move out at a walking pace, he shows her how to use the reins and heels. After an hour, she is sweaty and thirsty. Time is too precious to waste on a nap, so they sit together. Harman mentions riding to the top of his station to check for "duffers" (cattle thieves) and "poddy dodgers," friends like Don Curtis of Windermere Station, who take "cleanskins" (unbranded calves) off from one's herd for 4-5 days without food or water,



and then bond them to the water source more than to their mothers. Paget falls asleep. When she awakens, she investigates the primitive kitchen, makes omelets, and declares the house lovely, but the kitchen must be redone. He agrees and wants to install an indoor toilet for her. They drive back to town, stopping outside for a proper goodnight.

The workshop opens in December, soon after Topp arrives. A combination of air conditioning, phonograph music, uniforms, and spending money makes recruiting easy, but initially they stick with five girls. Those just out of school are better disciplined and find the work less monotonous. They scramble to furnish and stock the ice cream parlor by Christmas, holding off opening the Abo side until the clientele show interest (the following September). The first afternoon of operation, Paget and Harman stand outside in the heat, hearing the girls in the cool workshop singing Christmas songs, and hoping they can make a go of it. He buys her a soda, served by Rose Sawyer, and tells her Connor is worried about competition to his bar. When Fletcher shyly sidles in to talk to Sawyer, they bet on how long she will remain single. As much as she would like to spend time at Midhurst, Paget knows violating the rural code of morals would be bad for business and recruiting. Harman will fetch her at dawn on Sunday, the parlor's busiest day. Exhausted, she sleeps in her cooled room for 12 solid hours.

Paget meets Harman early morning carrying riding clothes she has purchased. She is sure it will be much less strain from now on. He hopes the rains come soon to break the heat. He mentions her fight with Watkins, the bank manager, about which everyone is talking. She gets so tired of having flies crawl on her, she threatens to report him to the head office and change her account. If she can keep flies out of the workshop, he can do more than sit on his arse and scratch. She is chagrined and says she will apologize. Harman says Watkins ought to apologize and he knows he has bought DDT. At Midhurst, he serves her breakfast and promises not to peak while she takes a nap. After tea, she wants to take a ride. Harman promotes her to a livelier horse, Sally, and teaches her to trot. It is uncomfortable but good exercise; she needs the ability to get around the outback. She wants, once they are married and the "wowsers" will not gossip, to ride with him to the top end, and he believes she is ready. He drives her home.

Friday, Watkins avoids Paget when she comes to do her banking, but the clerk James thanks her for making him start "distempering" the building. On Sunday, she works 9 AM until 10 PM with Sawyer in the ice cream parlor, selling 182 ice creams, and 341 soft drinks to a population of 146, at a profit of £17 13 s., or £2 6 s. per capita. Paget fears sickness recession and goes to bed. She opens Christmas day after lunch and takes in £20, playing dance music on the phonograph and attracting inhabitants she has never seen before. She closes at 10 PM, like the bar, not wanting to complicate rural life. The workshop dispatches cases of shoes for transshipment to England. The rains arrive on Boxing Day, turning to a torrential downpour but not dropping the humidity. Paget visits Midhurst soon after New Year. The swollen creeks terrify her, although they are only a foot deep. Soon they will be dangerous, however.



In Cairns that morning, 400 miles to the east, Jacqueline Bacon switches on the wireless radio to begin her "morning schedule." Her call sign is "Eight Queen Charlie." She has a long list of call signs to reach. First is Mrs. Corbett (Eight Baker Tare), with news about a son arriving by train, Mrs. Marshall (Eight Easy Victor) who, probably out feeding her hens, misses the call; Mr. Gosling (Eight Nan How) gets a telegram dictated: Molly has given birth to a son and both are fine. Routine calls continue for 20 minutes before Helen Curtis (Eight Queen Charlie) comes on hysterically sobbing about her husband's horse returning without him overnight. Bacon has a fireman alter Barnes and asks everyone else on the air to refrain from transmitting. Reminding Curtis to switch properly between send and receive, she seeks details. Don Curtis has gone to Disappointment Creek with Sampson, his Abo stock rider. Johnnie Walker, an excellent scout, cannot track him in the wet. Bacon calls the stations surrounding Curtis: Page (Eight Charlie Peter), who sets off immediately with Fred Dawson and expects to reach Windermere in four hours; Driver, who does not answer, Mounted Police Sgt. Haines dispatches Phil Duncan and a tracker and promises to contact Harman, who has no radio. Bacon stays on watch the first ten minutes of each hour while continuing her routine calls.

At Midhurst, Paget and Harman are planning a new kitchen when Fletcher rides up and delivers the news. Hearing Curtis disappears at Disappointment Creek, Harman says he is poddy dodging his 47 cleanskins, explains how he know, and describes where the corral is for Fletcher to report. Harman promises to head there with Bourneville as soon as he drives Paget back to town. Paget says not to waste time; she can stay at Midhurst until he returns or ride into town. Harman hates to leave her alone with just boongs, so he has Moonshine with her to town. Harman straps a tent, camping gear, and a meager quantity of horrible food on a packhorse, kisses Paget goodbye, and trots off. The rain resumes and grows steady. It occurs to her that Curtis may have turned up and all this is nonsensical, and makes up her mind to install a radio transmitter when they are married. She wanders from room to room with the wallaby hopping beside her, touches his gear and clothes, and marvels how here he had planned a fantastic trip that ends in Strachan's office. Dave Hope arrives at 3 PM, having heard a few more details. Finding Curtis in a 30-40-mile radius of sodden country is like "looking for a needle in a bundle of hay." Paget sends Hope off to help and resumes planning the kitchen. She wants to tear it down and start from scratch.

Along that evening, Paget learns a lot: a rancher's wife must develop fortitude, even if she is worth £53,000; a shortwave radio is imperative; in one's loneliness, animals are a refuge -she understands why the Abo girl Olive cannot bear to be separated from her kitten. She goes to bed at 9 PM, tries to read, but is too anxious, listens to the rain start and stop, and finally sleeps, lightly. Before dawn, she hears horses and goes out to check. It is Bourneville, speaking a patois she barely understands and reporting that Harman has found Curtis. He's up top with a broken leg and wants Hope to drive the utility there. All the other white men are gone, no Abo can drive, and Paget has only driven cars a few times - less than five hours total. It is a big vehicle and she worries about crashing it, but not trying will delay rescue by at least six hours. Deciding to chance it, Paget changes into riding gear, collects an old tin trunk of medical supplies,



adds blankets and emergency food, eats a bit, drinks some tea, checks the utility's fluid levels, gets the engine to start, and gingerly drives off with Bourneville in the lead.

Four miles beyond the bore, Harman sits at the mouth of his tent, pitched outside an empty log stockade and is boiling "billy" (tea water). He has Curtis covered with a waterproof sheet and blanket and asks what happens. Six cattle trample him. Harman says it serves him right, "mugging about on other people's land." Still, Harman has gotten 350 of Curtis' poddys, against 300 lost to him. Curtis says "a very rude word." Paget arrives, relieved, and explains why she has driven herself. Harman hopes the utility still runs and asks about the creeks. She fetches the medical supplies and examines the compound fracture and broken ankle that Harman has tended to best he could. They strike camp, load Curtis into the utility, and set out at 9 AM, Harman driving. At the first creek, the water is considerably higher than when Paget crosses, and the second is worse. As Harman guns the engine to keep from stalling, they hear the crunch of metal and stop dead. There is no option but to have them fly Curtis out. Harman finds a flat meadow a mile away, to which the horses drag the utility. He pulls out tools to clear bushes and fell trees. Paget volunteers to ride to Midhurst, send the boys to help with the labor, and then ride to Willstown, 40 miles. He insists she take Moonshine rather than try to ford creeks alone. He tells her the precise location to pass on to the pilot. She makes him promise not to fell trees himself and risk hurting his back.

Paget sets off at a slow trot astride Harman's big horse, Robin, at 10:30. In later years, she looks back with awe at the feat of endurance she performs. Bourneville rides close beside her as they ford the deep creeks, warning her to be ready to swim. It is too deep now for the utility. Soaked to the skin, Paget feels the chafing, grows sore, but rides on. They reach the homestead at 2:30, tired and thirsty. She has to be helped down. She sends all the boys with Moonshine back to Harman and prepares to ride to town. Bourneville, who has been in the saddle for 23 hours, says he is fine to continue and orders Palmolive to prepare food and tea for Paget. She accepts these on the verandah and knows better than to examine her sores. The short rest stiffens her muscles as she mounts for a 20-mile ride. The creeks are too deep for vehicles. She rides the last ten miles in a daze. She passes the hotel and ice cream parlor, stopping outside the police station, after eight hours in the saddle. She gives the pertinent information to Sgt. Haines, who helps her down, and insists on taking her to the hospital for the night. She feels like a small child, being cared for by Sister Douglas. Haines informs Bacon of the situation, so she can notify Cairns Ambulance radio and have Barnes dispatch a plane for a bush landing. Bacon puts Haines through to Windermere so she can apprise Helen. Helen has heard it all and declares everyone should be down on their knees thanking God for his mercy. Haines wants Duncan and all available hands to go help prepare the landing strip. She promises to send them and resumes praising God. Knowing every housewife in 100,000 square miles is listening intently, Haines says Paget deserves considerable thanks for riding 40 miles to deliver the message and is now in hospital recovering. Helen has been troubled about the sacrilege of operating the parlor on Sundays and Christmas (Haines has himself wondered about the legality and sought guidance). Bacon goes off her exhausting listening watch; she has missed her favorite radio program.



Barnes calls the Australian National Airways and gets a disgruntled Capt. Jimmie Cope into the air at dawn piloting an old Dragon, the perfect aircraft for operating in the outback. The ceiling is 500 feet in light rain and Willstown is 400 miles west-northwest, beyond the 3,500-foot Atherton Tableland. He must fly visually the whole way. With no breaks in the clouds, Cope flies dangerously near the treetops through a "dicey" jungle gorge, scrapes over the Great Dividing Range with 50 feet to spare, and heads for the coast. The medical orderly is frightened the whole three-hour flight to the Gulf of Carpentaria. They land in Willstown, confer with Haines, Douglas, and Burns. With a freehand map in hand, Cope heads for the makeshift-landing zone. It is 11 AM. Cope finds it easily, sees ten men clearing bushes, circles, and considers the risk. He drops a message to lengthen it by 100-150 yards and promises to return at 4 PM. Returning, he has no trouble landing. They load Curtis aboard and Cope tells Harman about Paget's harrowing ride. A half hour later, Curtis is in the Willstown hospital.

That afternoon, Paget shows Rose Sawyer the "more accessible of her wounds." Sawyer asks casually if there might be work in Willstown for a contractor. Billy Wakeling is coming for a visit. His father is a contractor in Newcastle and has all sorts of heavy equipment. Wakeling is fed up with Alice and wants out. Paget mentions Harman's dams and her swimming pool idea, if Wakeling can borrow a bulldozer. Paget wants to install the first pool in Gulf Country, near the bore, running its hot water through a cooling tower. There will be a lawn for sunbathing, and an old man would collect "a bob a bathe." Paget will charge the "wowsers" to watch the spectacle. She envisions a hairdressing saloon and beauty parlor beyond that

Leaving the hospital next day, walking awkwardly, Paget finds an airmail letter from Pack about her first consignment of shoes. Production batches will require improvements, but he agrees to market them. Knowing Pack, she and Topp interpret that as praise. They discuss two job applicants and problems with getting the girls' overalls laundered weekly. Paget declares the town needs proper laundry facilities. Topp reports that everyone is talking about Paget's ride; it is all over the wireless, and everyone listens in on that. They believe they will save Curtis' leg. Willstown needs a resident doctor. Paget asks Topp if people would use a swimming pool.

Harman and Fletcher arrive in the afternoon. He finds Paget in her room, writing a long letter to Strachan, but she insists they go to the ice cream parlor, to avoid scandal. She needs to remodel it with booths so young folks have a place to talk privately. She suggests banana splits on the house before asking him the truth about what happens to Curtis. Grinning sheepishly, Harman denies "pinching" poddys, admits to 1-2 getting "mixed up" sometimes, promises not to raid Curtis until he is recovered, and finally admits it is a sport. Finding Harman's moral standards in this area low, she changes the subject to the dams he wants. She suggests he talk with Wakeling when he visits. Harman declares that someone with a bulldozer could make a major difference in the stations. Paget is thinking more about the changes in Willstown, starting with a pool. He doubts it would pay with just 150 people living in town, but if the place grows it would - and would help assure that growth. Declaring the ice cream parlor a sure success Paget lists other projects for which she is asking Strachan for start-up money: beauty parlor, open-air cinema, home laundries, a decent dress shop. She invites him to look at the



progression already: she starts an ice cream parlor and employs Sawyer; Wakeling comes for Sawyer and brings a bulldozer; Harman gets his dams... He interrupts: she is getting ahead of herself. He admits, however, the town will soon be as good as Alice Springs, and she says that is just what she wants.

Chapters 9-10 Analysis

Chapters 9-10 show Paget beginning her building program in Willstown, visiting Midhurst, and learning to ride a horse before being forced again to become a hero, driving the oversized utility through floodwaters and then riding horseback for eight hours. The isolation of station life is driven home by the life-threatening medical emergency, the drama being raised by listening in on wireless radio communications. Prim and retiring when social mores require, Paget is again a determined survivor, doing whatever is necessary. She stands up to Harman about clearing the landing strip and, less vehemently, over poddy dodging, which turns out to be an unexpectedly hazardous sport. The religious theme rises again, but the sergeant uses the opportunity to inform the holier-than-thou ladies of the territory what Paget (not God) has done to save Curtis' life. Note also the way race relations in postwar Australia is handled; "golliwog," a 19th-century racist term for blacks, is used blithely. Having succeeded with her first improvements to Willstown, Paget now envisions a town as good as Alice. The final chapter shows it happen.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Strachan records that all this happens three years ago. Paget's letters sustain his barren life. The Curtis emergency helps her integrate into local life and she writes of the Gulf Country and its people as her own. They are married in April by a traveling priest in Shire Hall for want of a church, and honeymoon in part on Green Island. Over the next two years, Paget uses a good deal of her capital (£18,000), always seeing one enterprise well on its way before starting another. She names her second son Noel and invites Strachan to be godfather along with Wakeling, who marries Sawyer and builds dams at Midhurst that allow the herd to expand. The owner, Mrs. Spears, widowed and elderly, proposes selling them a half-share in the station for £30,000, with an option on the rest upon her death. The bank will advance two-thirds. It is a good station, a good town, and a good life, and they would hate starting over or mortgaging her businesses, for fear they could fall into ad hands. Willstown is like a baby, needing nursing.

Strachan worries if allowing Paget to put half her inheritance in highly speculative businesses meets Macfadden's intentions. He believes the recluse is kind and reasonable and would understand that Paget is now married with two children and a sensible man. He might not have insisted on a trust at all. Strachan is concerned, however, that the lease on Midhurst is for only 17 years, after which the State could seize it without paying for any of the improvements. His partner concurs. Accordingly, Strachan writes, offering to fly to Queensland and arrange everything. He has always wanted to see the world. Paget quickly cables acceptance. Strachan's doctor allows him, subject to the usual precautions, but his partner is hesitant. Strachan maintains this is the most important business of his life, and flies off Monday morning.

Flying the better part of two days and nights, Strachan arrives fatigued and relieved it is over. He rests two nights in Sydney and takes in the sights before flying to Cairns. Harman meets him there and suggests a meeting with his solicitor, Ben Hope, before continuing to Midhurst. His wife is tied down nursing baby Noel or she would have come. She is fine, Harman says, prettier than ever, and "having babies seems to suit her." They go over three years' worth of accounts, most of which Paget maintains meticulously. Harman tells about Paget's businesses, whose collective profit make up for the workshop's £227 loss. She believes that soon Willstown will not need its 20 jobs, for it has tripled in size to 450, thanks to a "snowball" effect of jobs and services. There are over 100 young females now, compared to two when Paget arrives. The hospital has been assigned a special maternity nurse and males are streaming in from thousands of miles away.

Strachan retires, thinks all of this over, and writes the Queensland Land Administration Board suggesting a meeting about the Midhurst lease. Flying to Willstown, Strachan sees the other gold rush towns from the air: grand rectangular layouts now empty of houses. This contrasts with Willstown, which is humming with construction activity,



sports very English planted streets, a pool, and a racetrack. Paget meets them in her own Ford utility and declares she is "disgustingly well." They drive through Willstown directly to Midhurst so Strachan can rest. He knows from her letters what to expect. He happily watches her busy life for three day from the verandah. She takes him into town one morning to see all she has done, tells him there are no ends to her dreams, and apologizes for always badgering him about money. Young married people need entertainment less than practical things like a grocery and household store and a proper tarmac road to supplies do not have to be flown in at great expense.

Strachan, Harman, and Hope fly to Brisbane for a conference with the Land Administration Board, and the two lawyers remain to tie up all the lose ends. With his business done, Strachan returns to Midhurst to spend a sentimental week with his friends. He asks if she will ever return to England, and she doubts it. They plan to fly to San Francisco on holiday next year, then drive down the coast to Texas, to see how Americans are dealing with the same problems they are. The Harmans want him to remain and live with them, but he insists, "the old have their place and the young have theirs." They drive him to the airport for a quick farewell.

It is winter now and Strachan cannot reach his office or club. He has spent the winter writing down this story and realizes his assisting in the birth of a city is a shadow of Paget's accomplishment. He writes her about how he may not have followed the Douglas Macfadden's will to the letter, but is certain James Macfadden would approve, having earned his fortune in the gold fields of Hall-s Creek long ago. As he dozes in his chair, Strachan dreams of an exciting life far away, a girl he meets 40 years too late, and a small town he shall never see again.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The final, touching chapter uses a visit by Strachan to tie up all the story's knots and point where Willstown and Midhurst are heading beyond the book. He finally confesses to meeting his beloved Paget 40 years too late.



Characters

Jean Paget

Medium-tall, dark haired, and graceful, Paget is the novel's protagonist. In the first part, she narrates to her elderly London lawyer, Noel Strachan, her harrowing experiences on the Malay Peninsula during World War II. Before the war, Paget and brother Donald go to Malaya, where their father manages a rubber plantation until his accidental death. She is working in an office in Kuala Lumpur, enjoying the high life, when the Japanese invade and take her captive in a group of 40 refugees. She emerges a natural leader of the women and children on a terrible "death march" around the peninsula, during which they meet a brash Australian POW, Joe Harman. He barter stolen gasoline for medicine and drugs for the women successfully, but gets caught stealing the commandant's prized chickens, for which he is crucified, flogged, and left for dead. After the war, on advice from her lawyer, Noel Strachan, Paget at age 27 uses some of her substantial inheritance to build a well and primitive community center for the women of Kuala Telang, who help them survive their ordeal.

Learning that Harman also has survived and been repatriated to Australia, Paget goes first to his home town, Alice Springs, and then to the outback in Queensland, Willstown, near even more isolated Midhurst, where he manages a cattle station. Harman, however, has learned she is not married as he had feared, and flies to London seeking her. From her lawyer Paget learns Harman is en route back and waits for him in Willstown, where she is inspired to open a shoe factory utilizing alligator skins harvested in the area. Her former boss validates the plan and sends a manager to help get them started. Strachan releases £5,000 in start-up funds. Paget and Harman are reunited in Brisbane, awkwardly until she slips into the sarong she had worn in Malaya. He recognizes "Mrs. Boong," the nickname he had given her, and the romance proceeds from there. For a year, Paget uses her inheritance and considerable energy to begin transforming Willstown into a place where young people would want to live, a town "like Alice Springs." After she plays a heroic role in saving the life of a neighbor, she and her odd projects are more readily accepted. She and Harman marry and have two children, and her building dreams to be unending.

Joe Harman

An Australian POW in Malaya during World War II, Harman drives trucks for the Japanese occupation force. He befriends a group of European women being marched around the peninsula, steals gasoline from the trucks, and with it barter medicine and drugs. He also steals some prized chickens that belong to the Japanese commander, who orders him crucified, flogged in public, and left for dead. Harman survives, however, miraculously recuperates, is repatriated to Australia, and settles near Willstown, Queensland, managing a cattle station named Midhurst. Learning that Paget



has also survived and is not, as he had feared, married, Harman uses winnings from a state lottery to fly to Britain and search for her.

Harman tracks down an aunt in Wales, who is willing to tell him no more than the name of Paget's London attorney, Noel Strachan, who, being secretly in love with Paget, maintains he lacks authority to give out Paget's address. He offers to forward a message, but Harman decides the whole thing is foolish, gets drunk, lands in jail, and has to be bailed out and taken in by Strachan. The lawyer comes to like and respect him, but sends him back to Australia without telling him that Paget there is looking for him. Harman meets her, awkwardly, in Brisbane. They warm to one another and decide to marry, but she wants to spend a year getting implementing a series of construction projects using her fortune to make Willstown a place where young people would want to live, a town "like Alice Springs." They marry and have two children, and it appears they will continue turning Midhurst into an economic success.

Noel H. Strachan

The aging, widowed senior partner in a London law firm, Strachan tracks down 27-year-old Jean Paget, the sole heir to the fortune of a Scottish client, Douglas Macfadden, and falls in love with her, without telling her or scarcely admitting it to himself. He gets her to recount her harrowing experience as a prisoner of the Japanese in Malaya during World War II. When Strachan advises Paget against hurrying to decide what to do, now that her financial fortunes have changed, she laughs and observes this appears to be his "guiding rule in life." Strachan agrees, saying one could have a worse one. He expresses qualms about Paget's idea of using the investment interest on her modest fortune to Malaya to build a well as a thanks offer to the women who help her group survive their ordeal. When Joe Harman, an ex-POW from Australia, arrives looking for Paget, Strachan withholds that she is looking for him in Queensland, but writes her to watch for him. Strachan has to bail Harman out of jail on drunk and disorderly charges, comes to like and respect him, and takes him in for the duration of his visit. Strachan agonizes each time Paget asks funding for new projects, but realizes that it is the right thing to do, for she is not the immature girl her uncle had been unwilling to trust with money. A final large request gives Strachan a welcome excuse for visiting Australia, which he thoroughly enjoys. Still, he declines the Harmans' request he retire and move in with them, returns to London, and writes up the fascinating story as his health declines.

Jacqueline Bacon

Call sign "Eight Queen Charlie," Bacon operates the wireless service from the Cairns Ambulance and Fire Station. She proves the central hub in the dramatic rescue of Don Curtis when he breaks a leg deep in the outback.



Don Curtis

A friend of Joe Harman and manager of Windermere Station, with whom he plays a continual game of "poddy dodging" - stealing each others' unbranded calves - Curtis rides on a stormy night to Disappointment Creek with Sampson, his Abo stock rider, and, when his horse returns overnight riderless, puts his wife Helen into a panic. With call sign "Eight Abel George," Helen reports the news to Jacqueline Bacon (call sign "Eight Queen Charlie"), who makes contacts to affect a rescue. Harman finds Curtis, up top with a compound broken leg. Paget drives the utility up to bring them to the hospital, but it breaks down on the way, and Curtis has to be flown out from a makeshift runway. The danger of sepsis and gangrene is by then high, but he is evacuated and given a good chance of keeping his leg. Paget's role in the rescue helps cement her position in the community.

Mrs. Frith

A 15-year resident of Malaya, Frith is a negative influence on the prisoners until Mrs. Horsefall dies and Frith takes charge of her son, Johnny. This does her a world of good and ends her chronic complaining. She declares Kuantan is healthier and the people friendlier, and the women march there. Paget, the group's natural leader, turns to Frith for comfort and advice. After Sgt. Joe Harman is crucified and apparently beaten to death trying to help the women, devout Frith decides he is a second Christ. Except for Paget, the others adopt this "awed and roseate" view.

Eileen Holland

An Englishwoman whom Jean Paget befriends before their wartime captivity, Eileen does not hold up well during the long marches. Paget takes over caring for her infant daughter, Robin, carrying her on her hip, Malay-style, while the older children walk with their mother. When they both die, Paget tries to interest Eileen in the baby, but she is too weak and sees they have bonded. As she lies dying, Eileen says it is good they get on well and apologizes for saddling Paget with the responsibility. She hopes her husband remarries, if he survives the war. Bill Holland finds Paget and Robin after liberation and does, indeed propose marriage, but Paget knows she cannot love him in the way he wishes.

Mrs. Horsefall

A stern-faced former schoolmistress, Horsefall assumes the role of group's first leader. She has a 10-year-old son, John. In Kuala Panong, she protests the lack of beds and nets and, when she rudely rejects Capt. Yoniata's argument that the Japanese always sleep on floor mats, Yoniata slaps her hard. Undaunted in the morning, she demands a water supply and a barrel is thereafter kept supplied by coolies. Horsefall asks how they will make the 47-mile trip, and they are told there are no trucks but they will walk



gradually with help from the Japanese soldiers. On the road, Horsefall negotiates a schedule of walking only every other day, lest more prisoners die of exhaustion. Horsefall reads from the Prayer Book when they bury Mrs. Collard. When young Ben Collard is stung by something Horsefall treats his painfully swollen leg. In the middle of May 1942, at Ayer Kuning, Horsefall dies, having never recovered her strength after a bout of malaria. Faded Mrs. Frith takes charge of Johnny. It does Frith a world of good and she quits her chronic complaining.

Douglas Macfadden

A wealthy Scotsman, Macfadden of Ayr becomes an invalid in his fifties, living simply in a rented two-room flat. He asks his lawyer, the novel's narrator Noel Strachan, to change his will to reflect the accidental death of his brother-in-law Arthur Paget. Macfadden believes women are irresponsible, incapable of handling money, and at the mercy of adventurers. He wants his sister, Jean, to have the use of the estate for as long as she lives, but for it to go intact to Donald when she dies. Strachan persuades Douglas to provide for young Jean's inheritance, should mother and brother both predecease her, but cannot get him to give the "lassie" free control of the funds before age 25. In January 1948, Strachan learns of Macfadden's death from his caring landlords and takes the train north to bury this lonely, reclusive stranger.

Mat Amin bin Taib

The village headman in Kuala Telang, Mat Amin is about 50-years-old, level-eyed, with close-cropped hair and mustache, naked to the waist above a sarong, with a firm, kindly face. He deals amiably with Jean Paget when she and the surviving women prisoners arrive in Kuala Telang after a half-year-long death march around the Malay Peninsula. She apologizes for having to speak about business, knowing that is not the Muslim way, and goes on to convince him that allowing them to stay in Kuala Telang for the duration of the war can help the village by providing workers for the rice paddies. After the war, when she has inherited a modest fortune, Paget returns to Kuala Telang and negotiates with Mat Amin construction of a village well and other facilities that would constitute a center for the women. He allows himself to be convinced.

Capt. Arthur Paget

The protagonist Jean Paget's father, Arthur is an Englishman who marries a Scottish W.A.A.C. officer, Jean Macfadden, during World War I. After the armistice, they move to Malaya, where Paget manages a rubber plantation. Two children are born: Donald (1918) and Jean (1921). When Paget dies near Ipoh in an automobile crash (probably after falling asleep at the wheel), Jean is in England, supervising the children's education for a year.



Jean Macfadden Paget

The protagonist Jean Paget's mother, Jean serves as a W.A.A.C. officer during World War I, marries an Englishman, Capt. Arthur Paget, retires after the armistice, and accompanies him to Malaya. Two children are born: Donald (1918) and Jean (1921). When Arthur dies in near Ipoh, Jean has been in England, supervising the children's education for a year. Jean dies of pneumonia in 1942.

Capt. Sugamo

The angry commanding officer at Kuantan, Sugamo becomes enraged when five of his 20 prized Black Leghorn fowls, imported from England in 1939, are stolen overnight. His Military Police immediately suspect Australian POW truck drivers, but thorough searches turn up on evidence. Coincidentally, MPs see the distinctive green mailbag in which they are spirited away being carried by a Japanese sergeant escorting British women and children. Sugamo confronts the prisoners with the evidence and tortures Jean Paget, who nevertheless sticks by her flimsy story. The thief, Sgt. Joe Harman, cannot stand to see Paget suffer more and confesses. Sugamo orders him nailed to a tree and beaten to death in front of the women and children he befriends. Learning that Harman is still alive in the evening, Sugamo goes to ask if he has a final wish. When he cannot locate any beer and, thus, cannot fulfill the wish in full, Sugamo is driven by Bushido to have him taken down and hospitalized. An Allied War Crimes Tribunal in 1946 executes Sugamo for atrocities committed at Camp 302 on the Burma-Siam railway in 1943-44.

Aggie Topp

A gaunt, stern, 35-year old forewoman in the Pack and Levy leather company, Topp is a retired veteran A.T.S. sergeant who serves during the war in Egypt, long separated from her husband, and disgruntled at work. Pack offers to send her to Australia to teach girls how to work alligator skins and, hopefully, keep her from quitting.

Captain Yoniata

The young Japanese officer who captures the English refugees at Kuala Panong, Yoniata speaks a bit of broken English. He lectures his prisoners about obeying orders, showing respect, and doing "good things." On the second morning, Yoniata interrogates them by family groups and dispatches the men to prison camps immediately, while the "womans and childs" remain. That night, Yoniata disciplines stern-faced Mrs. Horsefall for speaking rudely about a lack of beds and nets, but in time provides for basic needs. He assures them that when Malaya is conquered, the Japanese will have time to construct accommodations offering the amenities to which they are used. After six weeks, Yoniata sends them on their way. He is sorry their life has been uncomfortable but promises they will be happy in Singapore. Yoniata turns up as the group is resting,



following the death and burial of Mrs. Collard. Yoniata abuses the sergeant for not forcing the women to march. Yoniata is sorry about Collard, promises to try to get them a truck, but disappoints them. He leaves, and they never see him again.



Objects/Places

Alice Springs

Set on a red landscape beneath blue skies, Alice Springs (often shortened to "Alice") Joe Harman's prewar home. It is located in the Northern Territory of Australia, midway between Adelaide and Darwin. In 1928, Alice has three houses and a pub, but then the railway arrives; in 1930, the flying doctor service begins; in 1939, there are 300 people. Alice becomes a military staging point and in 1945 reaches 750. Currently it has 1,200 and is growing with new houses and shops going up. It is in native son Joe Harman's words, a "bonzer town." While searching for Harman after the war, Jean Paget spends time in Alice and feels instantly at home in this strangely English place. The main street is full of the amenities a young woman could want, including ice cream sodas, to which she treats herself. is also inspired by the quality of life there, and, when she and Harman marry, spends much of her inherited fortune on making Willstown into a town "like Alice Springs." Beyond this inspiration, little of the novel takes place in Alice Springs.

The Golden Casket

The Queensland State lottery that raises money for hospitals, the Casket provides an opportunity for several Brits to find Australian slang "Greek" to them. The payoff is AU£1,000. All Queenslanders plays, because even if one loses, the hospitals it builds are useful. The one in Willstown has three wards, a visiting doctor, and a wireless to contact the Cairns Ambulance to fly the sick to it, some 300 miles from Willstown. Joe Harman wins the Casket one year but saves the money until he hears that Jean Paget has not only survived the war but is not, as he feared, married. He uses his winnings to fly to London at the same time as she is in Queensland looking for him.

Green Island

A coral island several hours offshore of Brisbane, Australia, Green Island is where Jean Paget and Joe Harman get reacquainted after the war. There are no other visitors, so they get the two open bedroom huts with privacy curtains. Paget wears a new two-piece bathing suit from which Harman cannot take his eyes and she sees the puckered scars on his back for which she feels responsible. Paget grows weary when Harman fails to kiss or touch her, and vows to return to England if something does not happen before they leave the island. To force this issue, next day, she changes into Malay attire, hoping to become the Mrs. Boong Harman recalls. It works. The last night, as they kiss goodnight, knowing this will be impossible in stodgy Willstown, Harman suggests they return to Green Island on honeymoon in April.



Kuala Lumpur

The capital city of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur is the headquarters of the Kuala Perak Plantation Company, which employs Arthur Paget until his death in 1935, his son Donald from 1937 until the outbreak of war, and his younger sister Jean for 18 enjoyable months beginning in the winter of 1939. She lives in high English style and parties every night. When the war begins, Jean Paget feels no danger, since 300 miles of mountains and jungle stand as a barrier between the Japanese invasion force and Kuala Lumpur. When it does not, moneyed women and children are swiftly evacuated to Singapore, while the less advantaged suffer difficulties.

Kuala Panong

A small Malayan town with a resident District Commissioner, Kuala Panong finds itself burdened with 40 refugees, mostly Englishwomen of humble birth as Japanese invasion forces push toward Kuala Lumpur. The DC seats the arrivals in the shade of a verandah while he plans accommodations and fishing boats to evacuate them. The seagoing Customs launch Osprey brings not a means of evacuation but a contingent of Japanese soldiers armed with fixed bayonets. They arrest the DC, order the evacuees to surrender pens, wristwatches, and rings, interrogate them, and separate the men for immediate removal to a prisoner camp. Panong lies in marshy mangrove swamps, so mosquitoes are intense. Jean obtains mosquito repellant from Chan Kok Fuan, owner of a small Chinese store, and various other supplies that, after a stay in Panong of 39 days, must last the women and children during their harrowing 6-month forced march around the peninsula.

Kuala Telang

The Malay village in which the prisoners finally settle for the duration of the war, Kuala Telang is located on the east coast of the peninsula, halfway between Kuantan, where Joe Harman is crucified, and Kota Bharu, the next destination mandated by Japanese authorities. They arrive at the end of August, in this village on the South China Sea that lives by fishing and growing rice. Telang consists of a square surrounded by native shops, with a godown (warehouse) for rice behind. Currently empty, the godown becomes the prisoners' home. The sergeant gets malaria and the women nurse him, remembering his past help. The village headman is Mat Amin bin Taib, who is convinced to allow them to stay for the duration of the war, providing badly needed workers for the rice paddies (the men folk having been impressed by the Japanese to build runways). After the war, when she has inherited a modest fortune, Paget returns to Kuala Telang and negotiates with Mat Amin construction of a village well and other facilities that would constitute a center for the women. Again, he allows himself to be convinced.



Midhurst Station

The cattle ranch near Willstown, which Joe Harman manages after the war, Midhurst Station is 1,100 square miles and carries 9,000 head, but could support double that, which would bring annual income to £12,000-£13,000. He wants to invest in dams but doubts he could find and keep laborers. He, Lennon, and Dave Hope are the only white ringers. Three square miles around the homestead are fenced off as a paddock. The house is located on a low hill above a dry creek. It is a large wooden building set on posts, surrounded by a deep verandah, where Harman sleeps and does most of his living. The roof is, inevitably corrugated iron. There are three bedrooms and a sitting room, plus kitchen and bathroom annexes at opposite ends. The toilet is in a hut some distance away. The owner, Mrs. Spears, widowed and elderly, proposes selling Harman a half-share in the station for £30,000, with an option on the rest upon her death. The bank will advance two-thirds. It is a good station, a good town, and a good life, and they would hate starting over or mortgaging her businesses, for fear they could fall into bad hands.

Owen, Dalhousie, and Peters

The London law firm that handles the Macfadden estate, Owen, Dalhousie, and Peters is headed by 1935 by Noel H. Strachan, a rather conservative aging widower. That year, Douglas Macfadden needs his will changed so his widowed sister Jean enjoys the use of it until her death, but it then goes intact to nephew Donald. At Strachan's insistence, provision is added for niece Jean to inherit, should mother and brother predecease her, but not before age 25 (in 1956). Strachan as executor and trustee returns to London, drafts the will, sends it off for signature, and never sees Douglas alive again. Macfadden dies in 1948, leaving £53,000, which grosses £1,550 a year, leaving after taxes £900 to spend. Strachan tracks down 27-year-old Jean Paget, the sole surviving heir, and falls in love with her, without telling her or scarcely admitting it to himself, and devotes much time to her account over the next three years.

Willstown

Located at the mouth of the Gilbert River on the Gulf of Carpentaria, Willstown is a small outback town in Queensland, Australia. It boasts an airstrip, two-story hotel, 30 buildings, widely scattered on unpaved streets, and three-ward hospital served by a visiting doctor and connected by wireless to Cairns Ambulance. The countryside is wooded with gum trees. The deep river flows into the sea three miles below town; all other watercourses are normally dry. The local attraction is a bore that spouts water and natural gas and can be lit for amusement after dark. An adjacent hut contains a concrete pool filled with run-off for refreshing bathing. Locals argue whether Willstown during the gold rush (1893-1905) boasts 8,000 or 30,000 people, but there are 146 currently, excluding "boongs" (Aborigines). When the town generator shuts down after the bar closes at 10 PM, Willstown sleeps. Abundant alligators in the area suggest to Jean Paget a possible enterprise: manufacturing shoes. After marrying Joe Harman, a



native of Alice Springs, Jean Paget uses her inherited wealth to turn primitive Willstown into a place where people would like to live, a town "like Alice Springs."

Wollara Station

A cattle station 110 miles southwest of Alice Spring, Wollara is 2,700 square miles supporting 18,000 head, easily run before the war by Tommy Duveen and thirteen ringers. Sgt Joe Harman describes it in detail to Jean Paget while both are POWs in Malaya. When she learns he survives his crucifixion, she begins her inquiries at Wollara. Harman, however, reclaims his old job for only six months after being repatriated before disappearing. There is no telephone in Wollara, but every morning and evening the radio network operator passes gossip among 50 stations.



Themes

Prejudice

A Town Like Alice deals with two world empires in collision, each with its own self-image and view of others as culturally and in some cases racially inferior. Women are, of course, given the era, inferior. The colonials, in turn, have a set view of their masters. All of this is examined. Protagonist Jean Paget, a middle class Briton who expects to work her entire life and is prejudiced against marriage unless the ideal man comes along, is able to deal with Malays, whose language she speaks, and the enemy Japanese. The Malays, subjugated by the English for centuries and now invaded by the Japanese, are the most open, reacting with no more than astonishment when the white women go native in dress and work in the rice paddies, so contrary to stereotype.

The Japanese invaders demand polite treatment in terms of their own culture, which means the subjects rising and bowing when they enter a room. The Britons, to whom they are "Japs" or "Nips" (no political correctness during World War II), are slow to drop their haughtiness, even in the face of corporal punishment. Individual Japanese non-commissioned officers and enlisted men prove humane and helpful, outside the stereotype and, when one dies, the British women mourn his passing - after first delighting in his disease, simply because he is the enemy. The sadistic Capt. Sugamo, who orders Harman crucified and beaten to death for theft, later has him taken to hospital when he cannot fulfill the man's dying wish; the code of Bushido demands this. The narrator comments that Westerners can never fully understand the Japanese mind.

In Australia, the Aborigines are "boongs," uneducated laborers, not to be left alone with white women. Racial segregation is still enforced. Women entering bars is strictly taboo. Note the parallel between how Paget has to obtain from male trustees, British and Malay permission to use her own money to do something that will benefit women.

Religion

Much of A Town Like Alice takes place in Muslim Malaya, where modern readers may be amazed to find so much tolerance. Prisoners who die are buried in Muslim cemeteries, and even have crosses erected over their graves. Individual Muslims understand cultural differences and do not take offense (perhaps because British colonial rule has been so recently interrupted and it is assumed it will return) at women talking almost as equals or failing to veil themselves. Protagonist Jean Paget, herself not formally religious, shows profound sensitivity to cultural and religious feelings. In one village, she hears a verse from the Qur'an particularly favorable to women being well-treated, and quotes it in another when it appears the headman is going to allow the women simply to die, because the Qur'an speak of death as inevitable for all. The headman is amazed and asks if she is a Muslim. She cannot lie and admits how she has learned the words she has used. He calls her clever and listens to her proposals.



When the Japanese crucify Joe Harman and, apparently, beat him to death, one of the women prisoners turns him into a Christ figure, who feeds the poor and suffers death on their behalf. Many of the other women, desperate for God to help them return home to husbands and a "Western way of life," accept this view, but Paget, who knows Harman best and mourns him the most, knows better. She later tells him the story when he has a moral lapse over stealing cattle.

An Australian women, learning that a man lost and injured in the outback has been saved, declares it a mighty work of God and over the open shortwave radio, calls on everyone to get down on bended knee and thank God for this and all his other blessings. The Mounted Police sergeant, knowing that many women criticize Paget for opening her ice cream parlor on Sundays and Christmas afternoon, points out that to God alone is not due all the thanks - for Paget is in hospital recovering from a valiant ride to bring word to the rescuers of the victim's location. That has been Paget's role all along, without being overtly religious.

Money

The "root of all evil" is shown in *A Town Like Alice* to be capable of great good, given the proper frame of mind. Early in their captivity, the Englishwomen are loath to pool their remaining money to buy provisions and medicine to benefit all. Those with large families prefer to hoard. Later, they come to hock possessions to buy things more necessary. The Chinese merchants see the Englishwomen ripe for the picking and inflate prices as stocks dwindle and demand grows.

The rich Scotsman who provides a trust for the protagonist Jean Paget assumes women are incapable of managing money; she proves him wrong. She spends the novel asking her trustee for funds to do good things in Malaya and in the outback of Australia. She sees women in Malaya having to labor hard carrying drinking water when a solution is readily available - sinking a well in the village. Having received an inheritance that frees her from work unless she wishes to work, Paget cannot enjoy herself until she fills this need for a modest expenditure. In Australia, she learns that men will not stay in the Gulf Country because there are not marriageable women and the women will not stay because there are no jobs for females. Paget opens a shoe factory to employ women and an ice cream parlor where they can spend their earnings, and this expands into more jobs, more men flowing into town, marriages, children, and new services for families. The labor force is now stable, thanks to an intelligent use of money.

In the final chapter, the trustee, the novel's narrator, Noel Strachan, notes that the source of his late client's fortune is that man's father, who strikes gold in Australia in the 19th century, takes the wealth out to his native Scotland, and now, his great-niece has brought it back to where it should properly be spent, doing good. Money need not be the "root of all evil"

Style

Point of View

A Town Like Alice is told from the point of view of Noel Strachan, an aging senior partner in a London law firm. At the end of the novel, Strachan explains how he has devoted the last three years of declining health to going over precious correspondence with his client, the protagonist Jean Paget, and writing up her amazing story. In the early chapters, he shows her telling him the details, and each chapter ends with them coming back to the present for a brief reflection.

Strachan at times speaks in the first person, talking about his interactions with Paget, and sometimes reproduces conversations so intimate and detailed that it is difficult to imagine any letter or conversation that could have conveyed them to him. Much of the time, Strachan recedes into the background, allowing the story line - particularly in Australia - to move forward on its own, but he returns for the final first-person chapter, in order to contemplate the meaning of all that has transpired.

The core of Paget's story is based on a real-life incident, as Nevil Shute explains in the author's note that follows the text: "After the conquest of Malaya in 1942 the Japanese invaded Sumatra and quickly took the island. A party of about eighty Dutch women and children were collected in the vicinity of Padang. The local Japanese commander was reluctant to assume the responsibility for these women and, to solve his problem, marched them out of his area. So began a trek all around Sumatra that lasted for two and a half years. At the end of this vast journey less than thirty of them were still alive."

Setting

A Town Like Alice takes its title from Alice Springs, a small town in the Northern Territory of Australia, midway between Adelaide and Darwin, but little else. It is set a few years after World War II, but the first third tells harrowing wartime ordeals on the Malay Peninsula, as the protagonist, Jean Paget, endures a six-month "death march" with a group of women and children whose numbers rapidly dwindle until they are allowed to settle for the duration in Kuala Telang, a village on the east coast of the peninsula, halfway between Kuantan, where Paget's love interest, Joe Harman, is crucified and left for dead, and Kota Bharu, the next mandated destination.

The novel opens and closes in London, England, in the office and flat of the narrator, attorney Noel H. Strachan. It then jumps to Malaya, as Paget tell him her story, and then back to London as Strachan arranges her inheritance. She sails to Malaya to thank the women of Kuala Telang by building them a well, and intends to come back to her humdrum life. Instead, she learns that Harman has survived and flies to Australia to find him, while he flies to England to find her.



The second half of the novel is set in various parts of Australia, most of it in Willstown, a small outback town in Queensland on the Gulf of Carpentaria, and Midhurst Station, a cattle ranch some 20 miles away. Much of the actions depicts Paget using her inheritance and considerable energy to begin transforming Willstown into a place where young people would want to live, a town "like Alice Springs."

Language and Meaning

A Town Like Alice by the English author Nevil Shute is first published in 1950, not long after the action it portrays. It is narrated in the past tense by a London lawyer, ostensibly from extensive correspondence and memory of stories told by the protagonist, Jean Paget. Some of it is in the first person and some in the third. Language and spelling are British during the parts set in London and Malaya, and heavily idiomatic Australian during the rest. Shute appears to have great fun showing the trouble that those among whom he is born have in understanding the colorful words and phrases used by those among whom he settles after the war.

Much attention is given to the difficulty Britons have out in the colonies. In addition to Australia slang, most cannot understand the Malays, and none knows Japanese, when the war overtakes them. Paget speaks Malay because she is born there and her mother insists she and her brother keep it up. She and the women with whom she wanders pick up a little Japanese. Most Malays speak Pidgin English, as do the Aborigines of Australia. Paget is chagrined not to be able to understand them without several repetitions and (rightly) blames herself, not them.

The novel is written in the smoothly flowing, richly detail style that sometimes still survives in the mid-20th century. Readers today must bear in mind that in the postwar era there is no concern for "political correctness" on such matters as race, gender, smoking, or even the use of DDT as a pesticide. The defeated enemies are "Japs" or "Nips," and the Aborigines "boongs"; women do not enter bars, and couples do not kiss in public. Muslim customs are treated sensitively in Malaya, because the protagonist sees how best to get things done.

Structure

A Town Like Alice consists of eleven numbered but untitled chapters and an "Author's Note" describing how Nevil Shute comes upon the core story of a group of women enduring a "death march" around Malaya during World War II.

The book opens in London, as the narrator tells how his firm comes to represent a wealthy Scotsman who, when he dies in 1948, leaves his money to his niece, the protagonist, Jean Paget. As they wait for the legal matters to be settled, she tells him about what she has endured in Malaya for three and a half years, as preface to asking him, as her trustee, to authorize enough money for her to return and build a well in the village that, taking them in, ensures their survival.



In the village, Paget learns that a man she had come to care about and believes to have seen brutally murdered survives the war and has returned to his native Australia. The story separates briefly into two lines, as Paget travels around Australia looking for him and he travels around England looking for her. The lawyer, who himself has fallen in love with Paget, become the fulcrum.

Thereafter, the action takes place in the Australian outback, as Paget uses her inheritance to turn primitive Willstown into a place young people will not flee, by offering jobs and services. Her ambitions keep enlarging as she begins to fit in, and Willstown becomes "a town like Alice," the only other outback place with a high standard of living.

The concluding chapter is the narrator's reminiscences about visiting Australia and, in his declining years, writing up the extraordinary story in which he has been tangentially involved.



Quotes

"An officer came presently, when night had fallen, and inspected the crowd on the verandah in the light of a hurricane lamp; he walked down the verandah thrusting his lamp forward at each group, a couple of soldiers hard on his heels with rifles at the ready and bayonets fixed. Most of the children started crying. The inspection finished, he made a little speech in broken English. 'Now you are prisoners,' he said. 'You stay here tonight. Tomorrow you go to prisoner camp perhaps. You do good things, obedience to orders, you will receive good from Japanese soldiers. You do bad things, you will be shot directly. So, do good things always. When officer come, you stand up and bow, always. That is good thing. Now you sleep.'" Chapter 2, pg. 40.

"Grief and mourning had ceased to trouble them; death was a reality to be avoided and fought, but when it came - well, it was just one of those things. After a person had died there were certain things that had to be done, the straightening of the limbs, the grave, the cross, the entry in a diary saying who had died and just exactly where the grave was. That was the end of it; they had no energy for afterthoughts." Chapter 3, pgs. 62-63.

"Darkness was closing down in my London sitting-room, the early darkness of a stormy afternoon. The rain still beat upon the window. The girl sat staring into the fire, immersed in her sad memories. 'They crucified him,' she said quietly. 'They took us all down to Kuantan, and they nailed his hands to a tree, and beat him to death. they kept us there, and made us look on while they did it.'" Chapter 3, pg. 85.

"They all improved, in fact, except the sergeant. The sergeant was suspicious of them now; he seldom carried a child or helped them in any way. He seemed to feel the reproofs that he had been given very much, and he had now no companion of his own race to talk to. He moped a great deal, sitting sullenly aloof from them in the evenings; once or twice Jean caught herself consciously trying to cheer him up, a queer reversal of the role of prisoner and guard." Chapter 4, pg. 87.

"Death to Captain Sugamo was a ritual. There had been an element of holiness in his approach to the Australian, and having offered in the hearing of his men to implement the last wishes of his victim he was personally dedicated to see that those last wishes were provided. If a bottle of beer had been available he would have sacrificed one of his remaining Black Leghorns and sent the cooked meat and the beer down to the dying body on the three; he might even have carried the tray down himself. By doing so he would have set an example of chivalry and Bushido to the troops under his command." Chapter 5, pg. 112.

"Jean sat while the men talked, trying to visualize this derelict little place as a town with eight thousand inhabitants, or thirty thousand; a place with seventeen hotels and houses thickly clustered in the angles of the streets. Whoever had planned the layout had dreamed a great dream; with people streaming in to take up claims and the population doubling itself every few days, the planner had had some excuse for



dreaming of a New York of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Now all that remained was a network of rectangular tracks where once there had been streets of wooden houses; odd buildings alone remained among this network to show what had been the dream." Chapter 6, pg. 160.

"She pulled one of the curtains for privacy; as she changed she thought that they had only one more day, and so much to settle that they had not started on. She would get nowhere without taking a bit of a risk, and it was worth it for Joe.

"In the half light he turned as she came out of the hut, and he was back in the Malay scene of six years ago. She was wearing the same old faded cotton sarong or one very like it, held up in a roll under her harms; her brown shoulders and her brown arms were bare. She was barefooted, and her hair hung down in a long plait, tied at the end with a bit of string, as it had been in Malaya. She was no longer the strange English girl with money; she was Mrs. Boong again, the Mrs. Boong he had remembered all these years. She came to him rather shyly and put both her hands on his shoulders, and said, 'Is this better, Joe?'

"She could never remember very clearly what happened in the next five minutes." Chapter 7, pgs. 195-196.

"They spent that day in a curious mixture of love-making and economic discussion. 'You can't tell me that a country with three times the rainfall of the Territory can't support a town as good as Alice,' she said once. 'I know Alice has a railway. Willstown's got rain, and I know which I'd rather have for raising cattle. If you go on doing that, Joe, I'll go off and sit by myself. We aren't married yet.' She removed his hand and kissed it." Chapter 8, pg. 201.

"It was a long letter from a very happy girl, telling me about her love. I was delighted at the news, of course. I sat reading it with my breakfast before me, and then I read it through again, and then I read it a third time. When I woke up to realities my coffee was cold and the fried egg had frozen to the dish in front of me in cold, congealed fat, but I was too absorbed in her news to want it. I went into my bedroom to put my shoes and coat on for the office, and as I opened the wardrobe to get my coat I saw her boots and skates, that I had been keeping for her till she came back for them. Old men get rather silly, sometimes, and I must say that that rather dashed me for a moment, because she wouldn't be coming back for them. She wouldn't be coming back to England ever again." Chapter 8, pg. 210.

"She thought of swinging a two-handed axe to fell a tree. 'Have you done that, Joe?'

" 'No, but it'll be all right.'

"She said, 'If you're going to cut down trees I'll take back what I said about not riding alone. I'll send Moonshine up with the other boongs to help you here.'

" 'You're not to do that,' he said. 'It's not safe for you crossing them creeks.'

" 'It's not safe for you to swing an axe,' she said. 'It won't help if you go and ruin your back up here, Joe.' She touched his arm again. 'Let's both be sensible,' she said. 'The work you'll do in cutting down those trees alone is only what the boongs will do in an hour when they get here. Don't take risks, Joe.'

"He smiled at her. 'All right. But you're not to ride alone.'
" 'I'll promise that,' she said." Chapter 10, pg. 247.

"He glanced around the ice-cream parlour. 'If everything you want to do works out like this,' he said slowly, 'you'll have a town as good as Alice Springs in no time.'
" 'That's what I want to have,' she said. 'A town like Alice.'" Chapter 10, pg. 262.

"I suppose it is because I have lived rather a restricted life myself that I have found so much enjoyment in remembering what I have learned in these last years about brave people and strange scenes. I have sat here day after day this winter, sleeping a good deal in my chair, hardly knowing if I was in London or the Gulf Country, dreaming of the blazing sunshine, of poddy dodging and black stockriders, of Cairns and of Green Island. Of a girl that I met forty years too late, and of her life in that small town that I shall never see again, that holds so much of my affection." Chapter 11, pg. 277.



Topics for Discussion

What significance are Jean Paget's ice skates and boots in the novel?

What are the significance of sarongs in the novel?

How is the Macfadden fortune tied to Australia?

Is Strachan justified in his handling of the trust? Why or why not?

What role does the unnamed Japanese sergeant play in the novel?

What role does little Robin Holland play in the novel?

How does Jean Paget's wild rides in the outback change her situation?