

The Rabbit Proof Fence

Chapter Six

The three sisters agreed that from that point onwards they would follow a routine. Whenever they arrived at a farmhouse or station homestead, Daisy and Gracie would enter the yard and ask for food while Molly waited a safe distance away, out of sight, where she could watch them. Thankfully, food was never refused. These handouts sustained the girls during their long trek home.

Molly decided to continue in the same direction for a couple of hours at least — just to foil their would-be captors whom the lady at the farmhouse may have contacted.

“We go that way,” she said, pointing north-east. “Not kukarda. That midgerji (white lady) know which way we’re going now.”

“You know, we shouldn’t have told her where we were heading,” Molly said regrettably. “They might have someone waiting for us along the rabbit-proof fence. Never mind. We’ll go this way for now.”

So they walked quickly, wearing their wheat bag capes and military coats that protected them from the rain.

They had enough food for a day or two, so if they quickened their pace they would reach somewhere safe before dark and make a warm, dry shelter for the night.

The girls were still in the coastal heathlands among scattered tall shrubs and low trees, having passed through the tall trees and open grasslands of the marri woodlands. Molly, Daisy and Gracie had grown used to the landscape of the coastal plains. They liked the Geraldton wax flowers and the dainty, white tea-tree flowers.

This drier, more northerly section of the heathlands, with its pure white and grey sandy soils, put the girls at a disadvantage. There were no tall trees with dense foliage under which they could hide from search parties.

Darkness and the drizzling rain forced them to find a spot to make camp for the night. “Here!” said Molly as she broke off a thick heath bush. “This is a good place to make our camp. Come on, hurry up and break more bushes.”

In a few minutes they had erected a cozy, firm little shelter under the bushes, then they rushed around and collected dry twigs and leaves to make a fire. This warmed them while they enjoyed their supper of cold mutton, bread, fruit cake and sweet, black tea. The fire and food made them feel more relaxed and helped them to talk and laugh together — a ritual that had been sadly missing during the past few days. Soon the heat made them drowsy, so they settled into their shelter and in no time at all, they were fast asleep.

The next morning the skies were clear. There was no rain, only raindrops drip - dripping from the leaves of the trees and shrubs onto the

sand and dead leaves beneath. Patches of grass were still wet and were dropping heavily with water. Just looking out made the girls shiver. None of them wanted to leave their cozy shelter. Gracie and Daisy waited until their big sister got up and made a fire, then crawled out to join her.

“There’s enough water in my fruit tin to make tea,” Molly said.

Gracie watched her older sister break the meat, bread, and cake as fairly as she could with her hands. They had no knife to cut the food evenly and to stir the sugar in their tea they simply broke a strong eucalyptus twig.

While the three runaways were having a quiet breakfast in the bush, news of their escape was spreading across the country. Mrs. Flanagan was not the only person who knew or guessed their whereabouts; the whole state was told about them when this item appeared in the West Australian newspaper on 11 August 1931:

MISSING NATIVE GIRLS

The Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr. A.O. Neville, is concerned about three native girls, ranging from eight to 15 years of age, who a week ago, ran away from the Moore River Native Settlement, Mogumber. They came in from the Nullagine district recently, Mr O’Neville said yesterday, and, being very timid, were scared by their new quarters, apparently, and fled in the hope of getting back home. Some people saw them passing New Norcia, when they seemed to be heading northeast. The children would probably keep away from habitations

and he would be grateful if any person who saw them would notify him promptly. "We have been searching high and low for the children for a week past," added Mr. O'Neville, "and all the trace we found of them was a dead rabbit which they had been trying to eat. We are very anxious that no harm may come to them in the bush."

"We go kukarda (toward the east)," said Molly as she picked up her fruit tin and emptied the contents on the patch of grass outside their shelter. "But we'll fill our tins first." Molly noticed that a few meters along the track was a pool of murky brown water trapped in the clay soil. It looked alright but was it drinkable, she wanted to know. She dipped her hands in and sipped the water. Yes, despite its color, it was all right.

Leaving the bushlands, they entered the cleared farmlands of the northern wheat-belt. Another farmhouse was in sight. Soon they were approaching the house very cautiously, and using the same routine as before, the girls were supplied with enough food to last them for a few more days.

Contented, and with full stomachs, the trio trudged on until darkness fell and they made a shelter for the night. Since their escape, Molly, Daisy and Gracie had cut down their sleeping hours from sunset to first light or piccaninny dawn; a pattern they intended to use all the way home.

That evening, the runaways chattered quietly around the fire before snuggling into their bush shelter to sleep. They talked about the countryside through which they had passed, from the woodlands of the majestic

marri and wandoo to the banksia trees of the coastal sand plains. They had seen the chocolate-colored river, they had slopped through the wet swamp lands and dipped their hands into clear pools filled with black tadpoles.

The girls were very interested in the way the water seemed to change colors with the soil. It was milky white in the clay pans and pink or beige in the more coarse graveled land. But the memories that were to remain in their minds forever were of the “funny trees” that grew around the settlement and the grass trees with their rough black trunks and the tufts of green, rush-like leaves that sprang out from the top of the plant.

That night, Molly shivered as she lay on the ground pondering on the day’s events. She realized that they still had a long, long way to go through an unknown part of the country.

The next day, as they skirted the green wheat fields using the fire break as a path, they were able to pass through the paddocks fairly quickly. In one paddock, flocks of sheep and a herd of cows grazed contentedly.

“Oh look, Dgudu,” said Gracie excitedly as she pointed to the white lambs in the flock.

The two younger ones oohed and aahed over these beautiful lambs. The girls were delighted by them and they reacted in the same way as little girls everywhere— they wanted to cuddle and fondle the little

lambs. Sadly though, they had a big task ahead of them, with miles to go and lots of ground to cover yet.

Daisy and Gracie looked back once more before they descended into another valley, through the wheat fields and uncleared strips of land then towards the red-colored breakaways in the distance.

Everything was peaceful, the birds were singing and the sun was shining through the fluffy white clouds once more. The rain had ceased and the girls now had plenty of food, but they were experiencing another problem. The scratches on their legs from the prickly bushes had become infected and sore, causing them great discomfort.

They tried not to think about the pain as they climbed into their cozy shelter that night amongst the mallee gum trees, acacia shrubs and York gums, and quietly listened to the sounds of the bush. The temperature had dropped considerably and a roaring fire would have been most welcome.

As they drifted off to sleep, they heard the barking of a lone fox, followed by the bleating of lambs. After a pause came the deep baas of the ewes, comforting and protecting their young ones from the terrorizing fox.

Rising at dawn the next day, the three girls ate their breakfast on the move. They had gone several kilometers when they came upon a large, dead marri gum burning fiercely. They walked around it quickly and disappeared into the shrubs.

Three days after the article was published in the West Australian newspaper:

Missing Half-Caste Girls

Constable H.W. Rowbottom of the Dalwallinu police station reported that, "relative to Escape of three Native girls from Moore River Settlement", he had received a telephone message from Mr D.L. Lyons, farmer of East Damboring who stated that, "he had just noticed in the West Australian newspaper that three native girls had escaped during the previous week. These children had called at his farm on Saturday and he had given them food, after which they had travelled across his paddocks going east towards Burakin. He questioned them and asked them where they had come from, but they would not tell him. The eldest one was dressed in what appeared to be a khaki military overcoat, and the others had khaki military jackets on."

The Eastern District Police Inspector Crawe was notified immediately. Later that afternoon an urgent telegram was received by Constable Rowbottom, from Mr Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Perth, authorizing him to "incur the expenditure to effect their capture". The constable left immediately by car to East Damboring, calling in at all farms along the road to Burakin.

One farmer, Mr Roche junior of Burakin, noticed a fire at the south end of his boundary and wondered what it was. When he investigated the next day, he found that a dead tree had been set on fire, and the tracks of bare feet were visible.

“It was useless to attempt to do any tracking as it rained all Monday night, and the tracks were obliterated,” reported Constable Rowbottom.

No one had seen the runaways at the town of Burakin. It was estimated that they had passed by, travelling due east towards the rabbit-proof fence near Ballidu. No fires were reported in the area. The dead tree fire could have been caused by lightning because Molly, Daisy and Grace had been very careful not to let their fires be seen. That is why they lit them in a hole in the middle of their shelters and covered the ashes over before they left.

Within days of the announcement, responses came in from all around. Telegrams and reports were exchanged back and forth. But the girls continued trekking on, unaware of the search parties that were being assembled by the police. They didn't know that they were just a few days ahead of the searchers and their would-be captors.

Within the week, the scratches on their legs had become festering sores. The three girls had been on the run for over a month. They had left the landscape of red loam, mallee gums, acacia trees and green fields and found themselves in a very different countryside; one of red soil, tall, thick mulgas, gidgies and the beautiful, bright green kurrajong trees that stood out against the grey-green colours of the other vegetation. Underneath the shrubs and trees was a green carpet of everlasting flowers in bud ready to bloom in a couple of weeks' time. The green

would then be transformed into a blaze of pink, white and yellow papery flowers.

Molly, Daisy and Gracie were very much at home in this part of the country. They evaded capture by practicing survival skills inherited from their nomadic ancestors.

“My legs are sore, Dgudu,” cried Gracie. “I can’t walk.”

“My legs hurt too,” chimed in Daisy.

“Mine are sore, too,” said Molly. “But we can’t hang around here all day, we gotta walk on further.” “I’ll carry Daisy first, have a rest then it will be your turn, Gracie,” said Molly.

“Alright,” both agreed.

The progress was slow and laborious but they persisted. When Molly’s turn came to have a break from carrying them, the younger sisters took turns piggy-backing each other.

To fool possible informants, they would approach a farmhouse or a station homestead from one direction and pretend to go off in the opposite way. Then they would do a full circle, making sure that no one was following them, and double back when all was clear and continue along their usual route. But they never ventured too close to any towns throughout the Upper Murchinson district.

One late afternoon, the girls were enjoying the mild winter day, with the sun shining on their backs. It was the kind of day when you felt happy to be alive. The absconders gleaned all the positive energy from

the environment, from everything that lived and breathed around them. It would have been perfect if only their legs hadn't been so painful and they had something to eat. Molly was out in front of the other two when she crouched down suddenly amongst some thick prickly kurrara trees and picked up a small stone and threw it at Daisy and Gracie. They had stopped to dig a hole under a large mulga tree. When they looked up, she signaled to them to come to her and sit down.

“Look over there, a station out-camp,” whispered Molly. “Go in there and look for some food.”

The two youngsters were used to this kind of request. When it came to obtaining food, they never sneaked or crept up to the places — the frontal direct approach was their method. Molly watched them from the safety of the trees and shrubs, as they walked up to the shed. Daisy peeped through a crack in the wooden door and saw the shed was unoccupied.

“Come on,” she called to Gracie. “There's nobody in there,” she added as she unbolted the door and entered.

Inside the camp, which was merely a tin shed with a bough shelter in front of it, were two camp beds, a table and empty four-gallon tins scattered about in an untidy mess. Daisy and Gracie quickly searched the shelves and the table and found some matches, flour, salt and three large Sunshine milk tins.

Removing the lids with a butcher's knife, which they had found on a rough bench, they were immediately overcome by the appetizing aroma of dgingi (fat), the tins were filled with dripping. They couldn't remember when they had smelt this last. They hadn't eaten since breakfast and they were very hungry, so they dipped both hands into the tin and scooped up as much fat as they could and ate it.

"This tastes really good," said Daisy, as she dipped in once again.

"We gotta hurry up," Gracie reminded her sister as she snatched up some of the precious finds.

"Come on," she urged and she rushed out through the door. Daisy spied a billy can underneath the table. She grabbed it and the remaining items and joined the other two outside.

They got as far as the kurrara trees where Molly was waiting for them, when both girls simply doubled over and vomited. When Molly heard what they had done she said, "You silly beggars, you shouldn't eat that dgingi (fat) by itself. See you both get sick now." She waited impatiently for the two little girls to finish emptying the dripping from their stomachs.

"Are you alright?" she asked them. They nodded in reply. "Well, come on. Let's move along."

Daisy and Gracie recovered enough to straighten up and take their position behind their older sister who was striding on towards the rabbit-proof fence.

That evening they supped on hot damper, which was made on a clean spare frock, and sweet black tea, then they slept in a dry gully. Their simple meals were just like the ones they ate at home— especially when they managed to find birds, birds’ eggs, rabbits and lizards to supplement their meagre diet. But their festering sores were still aching and they could find no relief. Despite the pain they pressed on using the same procedure as before; taking it in turns to carry each other— except Molly who was heavier and bigger than the other two.

One day about midday, when the sun was high in the azure sky, Daisy and Gracie heard an excited shriek from Molly who, as usual, was walking ahead of them.

“Here it is. I’ve found it. Come and look,” she yelled as she laughed and waved her arms.

“What is it?” asked Gracie. “What are you shouting for?” “I’ve found the rabbit-proof fence. See,” she said, pointing to the fence. “This will take us all the way home to Jigalong.”

“But how do you know that’s the rabbit-proof fence, Dgudu?” asked Daisy, with a puzzled look on her face. She didn’t notice anything special about this fence.

“This fence is straight, see,” Molly explained. “And it’s clear on each side of the fence.”

She should know, after all her father was the inspector of the fence and he told her all about it. Now the fence would help her and her sisters

find their way home. There was much excitement when the girls at last reached the rabbit-proof fence.

From when she was young, Molly had learned that the fence was an important landmark for the Mardudjara people of the Western Desert who migrated south from the remote regions. They knew that once they reached Billanooka Station, it was simply a matter of following the rabbit-proof fence to their final destination, the Jigalong government depot; the desert outpost of the white man. The fence cut through the country from south to north. It was a typical response by the white people to a problem of their own making. Building a fence to keep the rabbits out proved to be a futile attempt by the government of the day.

For the three runaways, the fence was a symbol of love, home and security.

“We’re nearly home,” said Molly without realizing that they had merely reached the halfway mark, they had almost eight hundred kilometers still to go.

“We found the fence now. It gunna be easy,” she told her younger sisters. They were glad to hear that because each morning when they awoke they were never sure whether they would survive another day.

Molly was determined to reach Jigalong and nothing was going to stop her. She renewed her vow as she greeted the fence like a long-lost friend, touching and gripping the cold wire.

“We gunna walk alongside it all the way to Jigalong,” Molly said confidently. It would stand out like a beacon that would lead them out of the rugged wilderness, across a strange country to their homeland.

“They must have had plenty of rain around this country,” said Molly as they tramped through the tall green grass. It was difficult to imagine that within a few weeks this landscape would be transformed into a mass of color and beauty as pink, white and yellow everlasting flowers bloomed. These would cover the red earth and delight any travelers who passed through. But the three girls would not have that pleasure as they would be miles away by then, out of the Murchinson and into the Pilbara region.

By mid-afternoon, they entered a clearing amongst the mulga and gidgi trees and found some murrandu holes that appeared promising. But at that very moment, they heard a man yelling out to them. “Hey, you girls. Wait.” The voice came from down the track along the fence.

They saw an Aboriginal man riding a bike. The three dashed into the bush forgetting the pain of the sores on their legs.

“Don’t run away. I want to talk to you,” he shouted. Peeping out from the thick acacia bushes they saw that he was holding something in one hand as he pedaled with great difficulty. “Look, I’ve got some food to give you. See,” he said. “Come on, don’t be frightened.”

Their need and desire for food overcame fear and caution. The man’s name was Don, and he explained that he worked on Pindathuna

Station. He shared his lunch of tinned meat and bread with them and gave them a box of matches.

“Where are you going?” he asked them.

“We gunna follow the railway line to Wiluna,” said Molly.

Stockman Don Willocks reported the incident to his boss. Mr A.H. Gillam telephoned Constable Robert Larsen at the Yalgoo police station who reported that:

One of his stockmen, Don Willocks, had reported to him that he had seen tracks in one of the Pindathuna paddocks which appeared to have been made by two females. He followed the tracks on 4/ 9/ 31 and came up with three female half-castes who were travelling north along the rabbit-proof fence. He then ascertained that ... one was about 8 years of age and the other two older. They were all dressed in khaki dresses and dark overcoats and were carrying a bundle and a billycan. [Original Police No. 5979/ 31 Reg. No. 1163.]

Don Willocks had noticed signs of the girls three days earlier in one of the Pindathuna paddocks, but he saw only two sets of tracks which indicated that, “they were in a bad way, as in places they appeared to be dragging their feet and that he thought inquiries should be made”. However, when he caught up with them, he was pleased to notice, “that there was nothing wrong with them”. He found that there were three of them and that two were carrying one girl between them.

Constable Robert Larsen of the Yalgoo police station, had led an earlier search party for the girls, and so he was keen to follow up these reported sightings. At last he would be able to inform Inspector Simpson at the Geraldton police station that some contact had been made with the girls.

A tracker named Ben from Noongal Station was brought into the search, and he and Larsen travelled to Pindathuna to pick up Willocks on 5 September 1931. It was impossible for the men to find the tracks because heavy rains the night before had washed them away. Nevertheless, the search party proceeded along the rabbit-proof fence for a few kilometers, searching for tracks as they went. Finding none they continued parallel with the fence until dark, then made a camp. At dawn the next morning they continued their search and came upon fresh tracks. Finally, however, Larsen recorded that the tracking

“was discontinued “owing to the tracker having sore feet, myself having to attend the Police Court on Monday 7/ 9/ 31. I decided to return to Yalgoo”.

Constable Larsen, Don Willocks, and Ben, the Aboriginal tracker, left the tracks about 28 kilometers north of Dalgaranga Station. What they didn't know was that the three runaways had climbed over the rabbit-proof fence and doubled back to pick up some bush tucker and return the same way.

In his report to Inspector Simpson, Larsen wrote:

Apparently these girls are following the fence going to Nullagine, and could probably be picked up at the next junction. No doubt seeing Willocks on the Pindathuna run frightened the girls, thinking that he would probably report the matter. I am of the opinion that they will settle down when they get further up the fence, as it would be impossible for them to keep travelling at the same pace on the 5th and 6th inst. having travelled about 40 miles in two days. (Original Police No. 5979/ 31 Reg. No. 1163.)

Molly, Daisy, and Gracie realized that although they were in familiar territory they were not safe from the authorities. The girls knew that they could be captured at any time of the day or night and be sent all the way back to the settlement. It was too risky even to stop to light a fire to cook their murrandu (lizard meat).

By early September, the police were increasing their efforts to find the girls and any information they collected was passed on to other officers stationed further north. Constable Summers, for example, notified Constable Fanning by railway phone on 8 September that the

girls were following the fence and would probably be going near Nannine and Gumtree Creek.

Constable Larsen kept Inspector Louis Simpson informed about the search. “The Tracker Ben is of the opinion that if these girls come in contact with the Sandstone blacks they will be done away with as they will not stand any other natives in their country, as they are a very treacherous tribe.”

The girls had been on the run for five weeks and were surviving on bush tucker and water. They would sleep for only a few hours under bushes as they were aware that they could be caught following their contact with Don Willocks. They purposely avoided station homesteads and despite the cold nights, no fire was lit.

Official Report:

Unless these girls are intercepted, I am afraid that they are in for a very bad time after they pass Gum Creek on the old Nannine - Wiluna Road. I feel sure that the girls will stick to the No. 8 rabbit-proof fence until it junctions with No. 1 rabbit-proof fence going towards Nullagine. Water and native game should be abundant at this time of the year, but as

the girls get further to the north, I fear for their safety.

Thus reported Louis D. Simpson, Inspector of Police, Geraldton on 10 September 1931.

One day, in a clearing close to the fence, the girls spied an emu(a big ostrich-type bird) and a family of six tiny black and white striped chicks strolling along behind him. While Daisy stood perfectly still behind some trees, Molly and Gracie chased and captured a chick each. The old man emu turned on them but gave up when he remembered that the other four chicks were unprotected.

The three girls waited in the seclusion of the small acacia bushes to see if anyone would come to investigate the commotion, but no one appeared so they plucked and cooked the emu chicks for supper, accompanied by damper and washed down with black bitter tea; there was no sugar left.

After supper, they slept under some thick shrubs. That night Molly dreamed that she and her younger sisters were being pursued by a policeman and a black tracker on a horse. She could see them riding beside the fence on magnificent grey stallions, coming towards them from the north. They were coming closer, and closer. At that critical moment she woke up shaking with fear and covered in sweat. Then she

heard them. It wasn't a dream after all. It was real. Clop, clop, clopping of the horses came.

Molly shook the other two awake. "Keep still and don't make a noise," she whispered, shivering slightly. "It might be a policeman and that Mardu tracker."

They lay on their stomachs, not daring to move, and watched sleepily as the riders passed slowly by them. They were saved again.