

Acres of Memory

BY D. A. CAMPBELL

When the last vestige of the world of Angus disappears under the advancing tide of the city, I shall still have a few faded photographs to rekindle the embers of memory. The warmth of nostalgia brings back only the happy days - the joys of my children in the springtime of life, when everything was fresh and evergreen.

On Friday nights we would drag out the old bath tub and bathe the kids in soft rain water, collected in a tank under the kitchen. In the warm evenings of summer, bath night was a joyous occasion to be celebrated outdoors - all splashes and laughter, with naked little bodies chasing each other around the lawn. We had so little in those days, and yet we had so much!

It was Friday when I first arrived at the "Hungry Hundred", not to farm but to find cheap lodgings. I was to board there until I had saved enough money to pay for my family's sea passage from the old country. To me, a stranger, it was a harsh, cold environment - life in the raw, totally different to what I had imagined and foreign to my previous existence.

Thrift was a byword in the household of Angus and there was only one room with heat - the kitchen. The cast iron cookstove fueled by hardwood, was a highly appreciated luxury, which a person was loath to leave for the cold, sparsely furnished bedrooms upstairs.

For a long time after my arrival, I reflected bitterly on the madness which had caused me to resign the King's Commission and seek a more challenging life in a new country. Many times I doubted my ability to replace the life of a professional soldier with a battered typewriter. Clearly (at that time) I belonged to a different life style, where gentlemen dressed for dinner in the Officers' Mess, and were accompanied by ladies in flowing gowns. I thought often of the glitter of silver on highly polished oak, white linen, gourmet food and wine.

I had just started my evening meal, having arrived late from the newspaper office. There was cold pork, some warmed up potatoes, homemade pickles and bread.

Friday night was also the night when Angus attended the "meeting" - I never did discover where it took place or for what purpose. Unknown to me at that moment, it was also a night for bathing and dressing up for this important occasion.

Angus pulled the old bath tub in front of the stove and although I sensed my pending embarrassment I pretended not to notice. Nevertheless, I seriously considered vacating the kitchen and taking my humble meal with me. It was a toss up between my dignity and the warmth of the stove. Comfort overruling my predicament, I stayed put for the free performance.

He made several trips to the soft water pump and carried buckets of water which he poured into the bath. Then he added hot water from a curious collection of utensils which had occupied the entire top surface of the stove.

Sitting precariously on a broken stool, he unlaced his barn-stained boots and let them drop to the floor. Some well darned socks followed.

He unbuckled his belt, unzipped his zipper, and his trousers and longjohns fell around his ankles. Pulling them off, he kicked them aside. His shirt and undervest he pulled over his head as one piece and tossed them carelessly on top of his other abandoned garments. He was naked!

His brown face, neck, hands and forearms were accentuated against his white, blue veined skin. There was a mark of an old war wound on his abdomen - a scar of knotted flesh.

He heaved a painful leg over the side of the bath and dipped his toes into the water. Satisfied with the temperature, he withdrew his foot and turned and faced me as if oblivious to my embarrassment.

To this day, I really believe he had intended this exhibition to be my baptism into the new life - as if he had to cut through the Limey snobbery which I had brought like an unwanted disease into his house.

At that moment, his eyes seemed to be bluer than at any time I can remember. I could have been mistaken, but it seemed as though I detected an impish twinkle - a sort of "how does this grab you" kind of look.

He jerked his head in a way he always did in a moment of triumph.

"I'm gonna have a bath" he said. "Guess you won't be eatin' me!"

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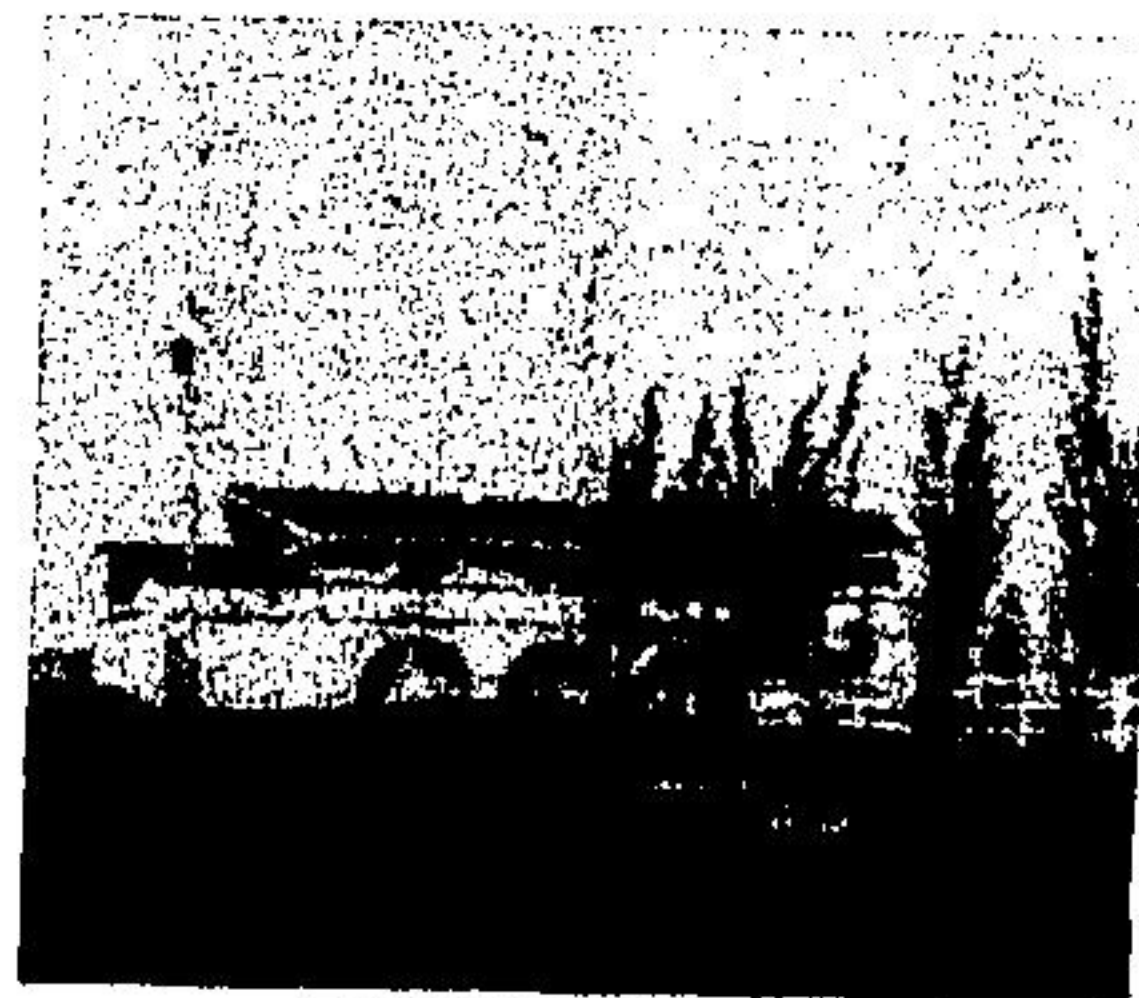
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